

Infrastructure in Black

An Ante-Commons in Colonial New England

David Kazanjan

The Select men [of Boston] do agree to order the High way Leading from the Common up to Centry Hill to be Laid open. Pursuant to the Law of this Province Intiul^d an Act for Regulating of Free Negro's &c. The Select men do order & require of the Free Negro's of this Town hereafter named each one to give their attendance Faithfully and dilligently to worke at repaireing & cleansing the High wayes of this Town . . .

	dayes
Tom Cowel	8
Robin Keats	8
Dick Budd	8
Thom ^s Moseman	4
Adam Saffin	8
Ned Hubbert	6
Mingo Proctor	8
Simpson Indian	4
George went wth Cap ^t . Green	4
Mingo Walker	12

...

—*The Records of Boston Selectmen*, May 4, 1708

adam Laffin [Saffin] Negero	} all these are willing to be bound for mad ^m Leblond—Negero Woman—that she shall be Noe ways Chargeable to y ^e town In Sickness or any disaster. disallowed by y ^e Sel:men the 23rd of march: 1713–14.
Dick Negero	
Ned hubbard	
Roben Keats	
Mingo Walker	

—*Proposal of Several Negroes in Boston*, 1714

where they exercised
“the hopes and promise
of paradise”
—Fred Moten, “hughson’s tavern”

On May 4, 1708, the Selectmen of the City of Boston issued an order that a road be built between Boston Common and Sentry Hill, also known as Beacon Hill and currently the site of the Massachusetts State House. The Selectmen then issued a racial public works draft, directing “the Free Negro’s of this Town” to spend between four and twelve days doing roadwork for the city, as my first epigraph shows. They listed twenty-four such men by name, and further empowered a Mr. Eneas Salter to refer anyone “who Shall neglect or refuse” to “her Maj^{ties} Justices of the Peace” for punishment.¹ Six years later, in 1714, five of the twenty-four “Free Negro’s” who were drafted into public roadworks in 1708 petitioned the Boston Selectmen to form what we might call a mutual aid society for a Black woman named Madam Leblond, offering “to be bound” should “Sickness or any disaster” befall her—which is to say, they offered their labor to the city to pay for any public support she might require. Their petition was denied, as my second epigraph shows.²

Countless orders like the ones above from 1708 were issued by the Boston Selectmen in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, offering vivid evidence of what Daniel Nemser has called “infrastructures of race, or the material systems that enable racial categories to be thought, ascribed, and lived, as well as the systems of domination and accumulation these categories make possible as a result.”³ As “the material conditions of possibility for the circulation of people, things, and knowledge,” infrastructures are built, learned, social, and relational, “and the habitual practices that congeal around them are themselves constructive of collective norms.” Those practices become normative because over time infrastructures can “fade from view, operating just ‘beneath’ (*infra*) the surface of the phenomenal world while facilitating the operations on which that world depends.”⁴ As Brian Larkin insists, this “fading” is the result of active, political practices.⁵ In this case, although roads like the one envisioned by the Selectmen in 1708 often followed Indian trails, the orders do not mention this because by the early eighteenth-century white settlers in New England were already practiced at pushing Native life beneath (*infra*) the structures of their world. If we understand race, with Nemser following Thomas Holt, “in terms of the ‘work’ it does rather than the form in which it appears,” then we can begin to see how the construction of a road between Boston Common and Beacon Hill became part of a colonial New England infrastructure in which humans, animals, objects,

and spaces were interrelated and ordered to produce racialized ways of being.⁶

The 1714 petition, in turn, could be understood as an infrastructure “in Black,” where “Black” figures the difference between the infrastructure the Selectmen “do order & require” and the infrastructure they “disallow,” a difference that escapes the present and signifies into the future. Adam Saffin, Dick, Ned Hubbard, Robin Keats, and Mingo Walker fashioned a plan for collective care in the face of Madam Leblond’s potential precarity.⁷ It is not clear why they were concerned for her, though their concern was unquestionably racialized. The Selectmen’s records explicitly link the appropriable labor of these five Black men with her potential precarity by calling them all “negero” or “negro.” Adam Saffin, Dick, Ned Hubbard, Robin Keats, and Mingo Walker repurposed that link to foster Black life. Their effort was improvisational, in that they did not simply reference a preexisting Blackness; rather, they remixed any such preexistence with the social relations they faced, imaginatively remaking their racialized world through the force of what R. A. Judy has called a “poiēsis in black,” or “practices-of-living” enacted by “those populations designated and constituted within the political economy of capitalist modernity as Negro,” practices “not fully comprehensible by the semiosis of that economy, particularly its grammar of ontology.”⁸

While it might be tempting to see the 1714 petition as an example of “commoning”—a concept whose popularity has exploded of late and which one scholar has described as an ideal social relation necessarily “antithetical to capital,” “without class struggle,” “local,” and opposed to enforcement by police—this would be a mistake.⁹ The details of the first 1708 order make evident the trouble with celebrating commoning in the Americas. The “High way Leading from the Common up to Centry Hill” would link a commons, created in 1634 on land appropriated from the Massachusett people for the use of white settler colonials, to the city’s highest point, which since at least 1635 had hosted a sentry or beacon “for alarming the country in case of danger or any outbreak,” likely from those very Massachusett as well as local Wampanoag, Narragansett, and Nimpuc people.¹⁰ The road carved out of Native land between Boston Common and Beacon Hill, to be “Laid open” in part by the forced labor of free Black workers, reveals how what Allan Greer has called “colonial commons” functioned not as anti-capitalist social relations but rather as collective modes of settler possession that supplemented individual modes of possession, and thus as tactics of accumulation by dispossession that would kickstart racial capitalism.¹¹ Commons in early America did not simply oppose racial capitalism; they often enabled enclosure, dispossession, and accumulation. Infra this whole story—underneath the extant archives and subsequent settler narratives of colonial New England’s

racial infrastructure—are active and intimately intertwined Black and Native lives and lands. In this essay, I will show how the 1714 petition from Adam Saffin, Dick, Ned Hubbard, Robin Keats, and Mingo Walker on behalf of Madam Leblond repurposed the racial infrastructure envisioned by the 1708 orders, unsettling possession in both its individuated and common forms and enacting an early New England ante-commons: collective action before, alongside, and apposite to colonial modes of possession, including commoning itself.

My interest here is not antiquarian. Because contemporary activists and scholars have revealed the many ways in which what Marx dubbed “so-called primitive accumulation,” or accumulation by dispossession, is an enduring feature of racial capitalism, attention has turned to collective social relations that unsettle, interrupt, and challenge ongoing dispossession. Such collectivities are often extolled today as “commons.” Certainly the commons were never entirely enclosed, and commoning has never been entirely subsumed to possessive individualism. However, as we will see below, if commoning was also at times the means of enclosure and an accomplice of possessive individualism, then we cannot understand every commons as anti-capitalist, and we cannot plan for our futures to be modeled after commoning in some general sense. Contemporary appeals to the commons will reproduce and extend the dynamics of the colonial commons if they do not reckon with commoning’s complicity with racial capitalist development. I hope the turn-of-the-eighteenth-century struggle over infrastructure I trace in what follows reveals an ante-commons irreducible to possession as well as to idealized and generalized commoning—an ante-commons that can inform today’s challenges to dispossession. Neither an anti-commons nor a commons, neither an irredeemable complicity nor a pure ideal, the 1714 petition “of Several Negroes in Boston” instead offers a critical vision in the spirit of what Fred Moten has called “the hopes and promise / of paradise,” to which I turn at the end of this essay.¹²

Colonial New England’s Racial Infrastructure

Of the people mentioned in my first two epigraphs, Adam Saffin is the most well-known among scholars today because he has left the most extensive imprint on extant records. He entered the archive in 1694 for what would become a decade-long legal conflict with his master, the wealthy merchant and judge John Saffin, who turned that conflict into a pamphlet war with another prominent Bostonian and ally of Adam, Samuel Sewall, over the validity of racial slavery.¹³ That pamphlet war has been discussed at some length by intellectual and legal historians, as to a lesser extent has the conflict between Adam and John Saffin by social

historians.¹⁴ While intellectual and legal histories illuminate the formal knowledge of settler colonials, they tell us less about the effects of that knowledge on the quotidian lives of subaltern people in the region, since settlers in colonial New England did not always act in conformity with their intellectual or legal principles, and so Black and Native people had to improvise their responses to ever-changing tactics of colonization and racial slavery. While social history animates the lives of individuals, its focus on the willful agency of historical actors can lose sight of the para-individual structures of, and challenges to, racial capitalism.¹⁵ Finally, while Black and Native lives are often either ignored or considered separately in scholarship on white settler New England, they were in fact central and intimately intercalated.¹⁶ The appropriation of Native lands was ongoing and simultaneous (not prior) to the appropriation of Black labor, and Black land and Native labor were also ongoingly and simultaneously appropriated. Attention to infrastructure overcomes some of the limitations of those approaches.

As Larkin has deftly explained in his review of scholarship on infrastructures in anthropology, the discipline in which they have been most robustly theorized, they are both “built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space,” and “semiotic and aesthetic vehicles . . . [that] emerge out of and store within them forms of desire and fantasy.” Consequently, we need to attend both to the materiality and to the poetics of infrastructure to understand “their technical operations” and “how they address and constitute subjects.”¹⁷ For instance, “a road’s technical function is to transport vehicles from one place to another, promoting movement. . . . But it can also be an excessive fantastic object that generates desire” for individual autonomy or unfettered mobility or the mastery of space, desire that comes to seem normal or natural—*infra*.¹⁸ Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls this semiotic element an “infrastructure of feeling,” pointing to the way prisons “become ordinary”:

Infrastructure: labor, land, financing, and the general organizational capacity to combine these things in order to make other things, in general, easier to make. While not always public, it is the form of most public wealth. Prisons are a monumental aspect of the ghastly public infrastructure underlying a chain of people, ideas, places, and practices that produce premature death the way other commodity chains crank out shoes or cotton or computers. Why don’t our heads burst into flames at the thought? Why is the prison-industrial complex so hard to see? The many structures that make carceral geographies disappear (which is to say, become ordinary) depend, for their productive capacity, on the infrastructure of feeling.¹⁹

As a “form of public wealth,” prisons are contemporary “colonial commons.” The Boston Selectmen’s delegation of Eneas Salter to police the

appropriation of free Black labor to build roads for white settlers on Indian land can be understood as an early condition for the infrastructure of feeling that would eventually allow carceral geographies to thrive and “disappear.”

Larkin stresses that “infrastructures are conceptually unruly” as “things that are also the relation between things.” They are structures whose phenomenal appearances often conceal their deeper (infra) material forms and social relations: “we often see computers not cables, light not electricity, taps and water but not pipes and sewers.” And yet it is not possible to strictly distinguish the phenomena from the deeper forms: “electricity may be the most obvious substratum that allows the computer to operate,” but “the computer is also the infrastructure of the electricity supply, as the entire transmission industry is regulated by computers,” and electricity “has other infrastructures, which can include oil production . . . , financial mechanisms . . . , or labor networks.” As a result, “the simple linear relation of foundation to visible object turns out to be recursive and dispersed.”²⁰ We thus need to track the ways the material, poetic, unruly, recursive, and dispersed racial infrastructure of early New England organized the physical and social worlds in which Adam and John Saffin interacted, even as their interactions helped to construct and contest those very infrastructures.

What we know about the conflict between Adam and John Saffin comes principally from the Suffolk Court Files, held at the Massachusetts State Archives and also transcribed and summarized by Abner Goodell in an 1893 article published by the Colonial Society of Massachusetts.²¹ Additionally, the pamphlets and diaries of John Saffin and Sewall shed light on their views of and rolls in the conflict, as do the Reports of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, a few records published in the *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* in 1877, and various colonial town records.²² Let me summarize the conflict as it appears in these sources, which we must remember are authored entirely by white settlers.

It seems as if John Saffin enslaved Adam at some point after 1689 but before 1694, when Saffin hired Adam out, along with a farm called Boundfield and “a Stock of Cattel, and Sheep,” to local white farmer Thomas Shepherd Jr. for a term of seven years.²³ Boundfield farm was on the border of Bristol (then part of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, now in Rhode Island) and what was then called Swansey (now Warren, Rhode Island, and Swansea, Massachusetts). The 1694 “instrument” or deed recording Saffin’s arrangement with Shepherd became a crucial document in the dispute between Saffin and Adam. Adam later claimed it promised him freedom after the seven-year term, while Saffin claimed Adam forfeited this promise by failing to follow the conditions the inden-

ture to Shepherd placed on Adam's labor: that he work "cheerfully quietly and Industriously."²⁴

In 1694, Shepherd put Adam to work on Boundfield farm. Eventually, Shepherd told Saffin that Adam "was so proud and surly" that he no longer wanted Adam to work for him, so in 1699—about a year before Adam was to be freed—Saffin took Adam back to his two estates in Boston, where Saffin let Adam out "sometimes to one man, and then to another, to work for his Victuals." Saffin also claimed that Adam continued to be "quarrelsome and contentious," and so arranged to let him out again in Bristol to a man from Swansea. At that point, again according to Saffin, Adam "absolutely refused, and would not go; but after I was gone, he took his Cloaths out of the house by stealth, and went about the Town at his pleasure."²⁵ Convinced he was supposed to be free according to the terms of Saffin's agreement with Shepherd, Adam sought help from Sewall, who with another prominent Bostonian, Isaac Addington, summoned Saffin and told him he had to free Adam. Saffin challenged this order, calling it a "Negromantick Summons," and with Lieutenant Colonel James Townsend's help initiated a legal case against Adam. Outraged at Adam's claim to freedom, Saffin complained that "this Rascally Negro went about the Town swaggering at his pleasure in defiance of me his Master."²⁶

For the first hearing of the case, in 1701, Saffin got himself appointed as one of the judges who would render the decision, had one of his tenants placed on the jury, and influenced the foreman in his favor. Unsurprisingly, this court ruled against Adam. Saffin then ordered Adam to go to Castle Island in Boston Harbor and work for Captain Timothy Clarke. Clarke soon got into a fight with Adam, for which Saffin tried to transport Adam out of the colony. But Sewall, Addington, and Governor Thomas Dudley intervened, removed Saffin from his position on the court as punishment for his improper role in the case, and along with Adam's lawyer, Thomas Newton, facilitated Adam's appeal. In 1702, as the appeal was about to begin, Adam contracted smallpox, which delayed the case and made Saffin financially responsible for his care while he recovered, further enraging Saffin. Before the case resumed, Saffin again tried to get Adam sent out of the colony, but was blocked by the court. He also petitioned the legislature for a judgment against Adam, but was rebuffed. In 1703, the court ruled against Adam, but he appealed, and on November 2, 1703, the court finally ruled in Adam's favor and ordered him to be freed from Saffin. Though Saffin once more petitioned the legislature for relief, it refused and Adam remained formally free until his death sometime after August 9, 1715, the last time he appears on the Selectmen's work rolls for free Black men—his work order reduced to one day from what had in previous years been as high as eight days, an indication that he was elderly and/or in poor health.²⁷

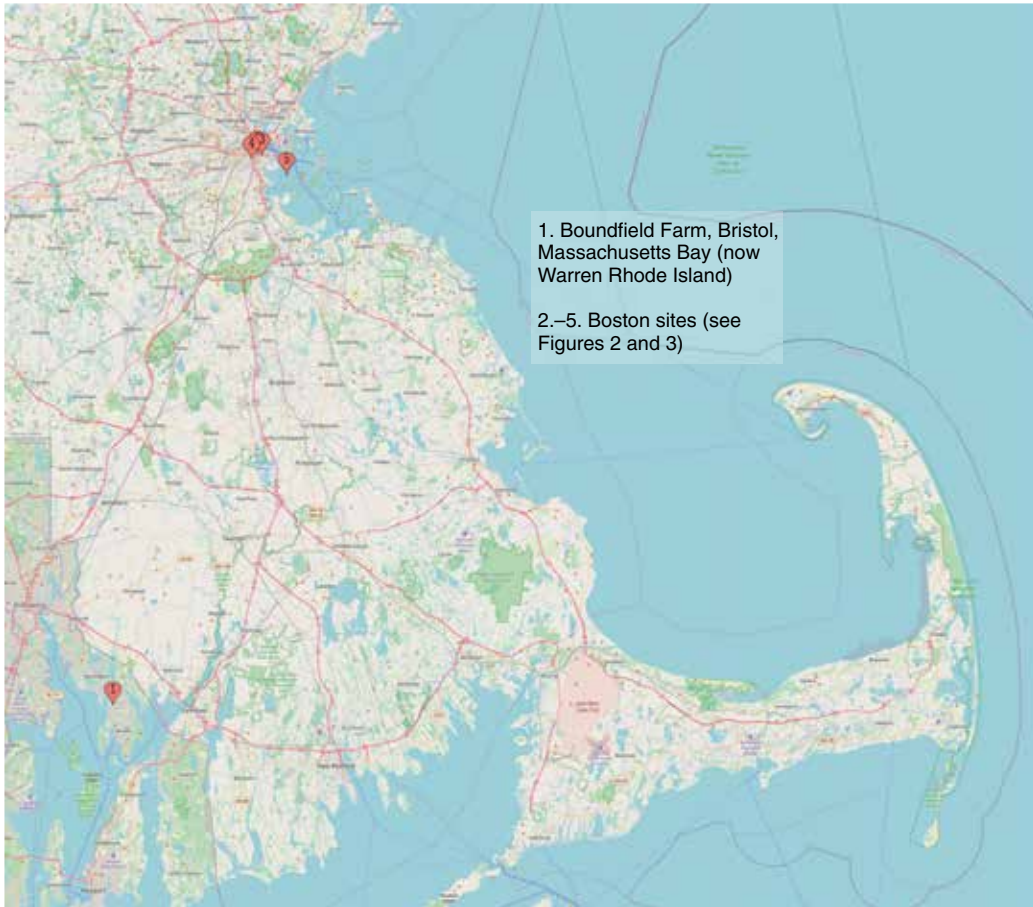


Figure 1. (1) Boundfield farm, Bristol, Massachusetts Bay (now Warren, Rhode Island); (2–5) Boston sites (see fig. 4).

Consider the infrastructure through which the parties to this conflict circulated, and the ways in which that circulation was represented. Saffin had three sets of properties where he and Adam spent time (see fig. 1): (1) Boundfield farm in Bristol, which he let to Thomas Shepherd in 1694, along with Adam and “a Stock of Cattel, and Sheep” (see figs. 2–3); (2) about fifty miles north, his estates in Boston, where he took Adam after Shepherd sent him back in 1699, and which included a mansion house, outbuildings, and an enclosed pasture (see fig. 4); and (3) half a mile from these estates, a wharf at the Town Dock, with access to Castle Island, in Boston Harbor, where Saffin sent Adam to work for Clarke in 1701 (see fig. 4).²⁸ The Town Dock was just half a mile from the top of Beacon Hill and another half mile from Boston Common, the location



Figure 2. Boundfield farm, Bristol, Massachusetts Bay (now Warren, Rhode Island).

of the road the Selectmen of Boston ordered “laid open” in 1708 with the labor of free Black men such as Adam. These properties were neither static sites, nor purely private possessions, nor merely material objects. They were connected and contested nodes in a developing infrastructure of settler land and labor appropriation. That infrastructure linked privatized plots with built structures to lands held in common among settlers, principally for livestock grazing, transportation, and military conquest. Let’s consider each of these three nodes more closely.

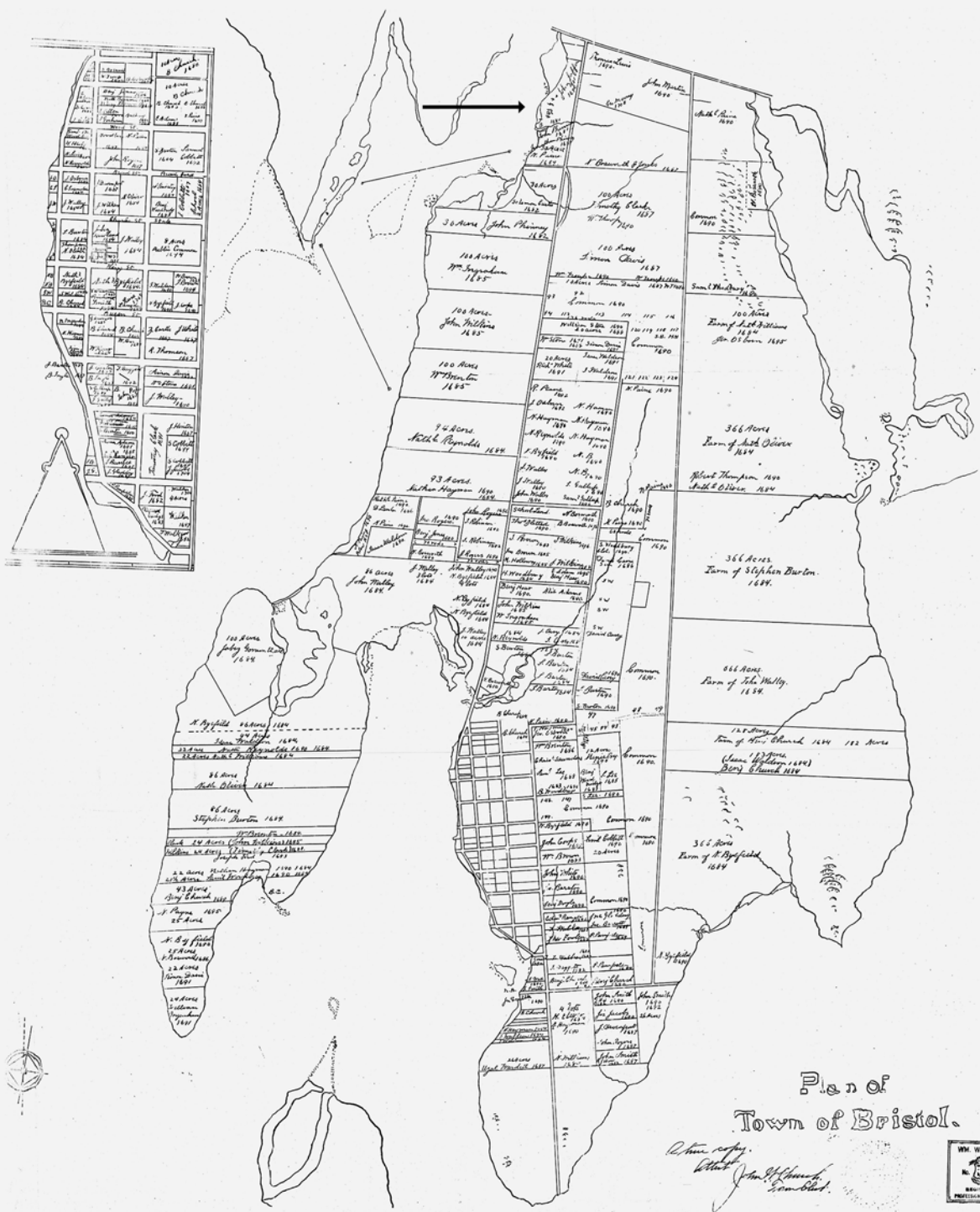
Boundfield Farm

First, Boundfield farm, where Saffin’s conflict with Adam began. Saffin had appropriated Boundfield before 1680 from either the Narragansett (according to his will) or the Pokanoket (according to contemporary

Native American accounts).²⁹ Pokanoket still claim the area today, particularly around the sacred Potumtuk, which the settlers named Mount Hope.³⁰ Boundfield was thus part of the white settler colonization that led to the conflict that later in the eighteenth century came to be called King Philip's War (1675–78), in which a coalition of Native people, led in part by Pometacom, also known as Metacom, Metacomet, or King Philip, fought the English colonists and some of their Native allies. Metacom himself was brutally killed in 1676 among the swamplands near Potumtuk, about five miles from Boundfield—after which his head was mounted on a pike at the entrance to Plymouth Colony for decades and his wife and son were sold into slavery in Bermuda. A map of the original settlement of Bristol, made by Samuel Woodbury in the 1690s, vividly depicts this wave of land appropriation, as all the deeds date from the 1680s and 1690s (fig. 3). Boundfield was on low-lying, coastal land, and so would have been a salt marsh farm used for the production of salt hay for animal feed and thatch grass for roofing. Salt marsh farming, in turn, points to the ubiquity of livestock, a key element of settler colonization, as Native people had no such animals before Europeans arrived and thus no need for feed farming or grazing grounds.³¹ Recall also the “Stock of Cattel, and Sheep” let with Adam by Saffin to Shepherd. The colonizers' use of livestock not only drove the thirst for land appropriation but also inaugurated a long cycle of environmental degradation whose ongoing climatological impact is now globalized.³² That Woodbury's map makes no mention of Native people reveals how readily white settlers pushed Native life and lands beneath (*infra*) the built and felt structures of their world, such as salt marsh farms and grazing grounds.

Those grazing grounds had a specific name among the colonists: commons. Woodbury's Bristol settlement map makes this clear, as its irregular checkerboard structure alternates private lots of various sizes with occasional, smaller lots dubbed “common,” all of which are linked by a grid of roads. So land appropriated from Native communities was transformed into privatized plots supplemented by common grounds, all of which were worked by free and enslaved Black men such as Adam, indentured white workers, and free white settler tenants like Shepherd, as well as Native waged, indentured, and enslaved workers who were increasingly severed from their colonized communities. The work done on that appropriated land produced capital in the form of crops and domesticated livestock, enabling further land appropriation in a vicious cycle of racialized capital expansion.

Figure 3. “Plan of Town of Bristol, a true copy, Bristol 1682–1687 (The Samuel Woodbury Map),” first created ca. 1690 and updated until ca. 1730; original located in Bristol Town Hall, copies in the Bristol Historical and Preservation Society.



The most famously enduring of these colonial New England commons is the one the Boston Selectmen wanted to link to Beacon Hill with a road in 1708, built in part with the labor of free Black men like Adam: Boston Common. About fifty miles north of Saffin's Boundfield farm, but less than a mile from his Boston estates, the land that became Boston Common was expropriated from the Massachusetts people, first by William Blackstone, or Blaxton, who arrived in the area in 1623 as part of Robert Gorges's colonial expedition. Blackstone was "granted" the land on what the colonists called the Shawmut Peninsula—after the Algonquin name for the area—by the Council for New England, the joint stock company chartered by the British Crown to colonize the region. In 1634 Blackstone sold most of his land to the struggling Puritan colonists of the Massachusetts Bay Company, led by John Winthrop, who left their previous two locations in Salem and Charlestown because they could not sustain themselves. The Shawmut Peninsula was particularly attractive because of its ample supply of water from rich aquifers.³³ Winthrop's people then turned part of their new location into a "Common for the use of newe Commers, and the further benefitt of the towne, as in their discretions they shall thinke fitt," a standard practice in Britain which the colonists applied to their appropriations in the Americas.³⁴ Boston's Common was common only to the white settlers, the "newe Commers," and they used it to graze their livestock and later to stage executions of supposed lawbreakers.³⁵

Native people, of course, were not in fact *infra* this world as they challenged settler development on multiple fronts. King Philip's War has been the most discussed, primarily in settler terms, as Lisa Brooks has brilliantly shown by historicizing its eighteenth-century name: "This act of naming contained the 'war' from an ongoing, multifaceted Indigenous resistance, led by an uncontainable network of Indigenous leaders and families, to a rebellion, an event that could be contained within one year, by a single persuasive insurgent, who had taken his exit and vanished."³⁶ Widening the perspective places the war and subsequent land grants like those recorded on the Woodbury map—both of which make Native people seem *infra*—in the context of ongoing struggle and persistent Native life. As Brooks explains, it is a mistake

to assume that a court grant can be read as the beginning of colonial settlement, or as a marker of legitimacy. In contrast, I would often find that a "grant" issued by the Plymouth or Massachusetts Court did not lead to immediate settlement, but rather to protests by Native people who inhabited those places. Sometimes the resistance to "improvement" was overt, such as dismantling built structures or assaulting livestock. In other cases it was a matter of discerning the evidence of continued inhabitation and signs of protecting land against encroachment. Often, statements made in court years

later demonstrated that although English people claimed title, Indigenous people continued to inhabit, cultivate, and know land as their own, retaining their ancestral rights and responsibilities.³⁷

So it is not enough to view King Philip's War of 1675–78 as a challenge to the settler infrastructural development that would lead Saffin to own Boundfield. We have to set that war's name and its years as well as the name Boundfield and each year and plot recorded on the Woodbury map within the ongoing "persistence of Indigenous adaptation and survival."³⁸

Virginia DeJohn Anderson reveals one such persistence, which also helps us understand the "Stock of Cattel, and Sheep" let to Shepherd along with Adam and Boundfield: a winter encounter a band of Norwottuck Indians had in 1635 or 1636 with a strange "small, horned animal, which they later described as 'poor and scarce able to rise'" from deep snow near the Connecticut River some hundred miles east of Boundfield, and which would soon die before their eyes. Their first encounter with this unfamiliar animal—a cow that had wandered away from a settler—would play out over the next thirty years as they sought to make sense of the "conceptual puzzle" this creature presented, crafting various names for it and the many other grazing animals that settlers would introduce into the region. In 1669, white settler Jeremy Adams of Springfield would absurdly demand compensation from the Norwottuck's leader, Chickwallop, for this very cow, claiming it had been stolen from him and killed by the Norwottuck thirty years earlier. Adams's demand failed in part because Connecticut governor John Winthrop Jr. and local landowner John Pynchon defended Chickwallop's people. But as Johnson explains, even their intervention "upheld the colonists' view that cows were property" and underscored the way Native people in New England had to struggle against and adapt to the impact of newly introduced animals:

Even as cattle, swine, horses, and sheep provided food and muscle power for English colonists—and, eventually, for some Indian peoples—they also competed for space with indigenous animals, altered forest composition, compacted the soil, and introduced diseases. In so doing, they threatened Indian subsistence regimes and even, as Jared Diamond has suggested, helped establish European hegemony in the New World.³⁹

Adam's own life on and around Boundfield, and his conflict with Saffin, unfolded within this world, alongside and in the midst of Native life.

The Boston Estates

Second, consider Saffin's Boston estates. They would have been the administrative hub of his business operations—his offices, as it were, as well as



Figure 4. (2) Saffin's Estates; (3) Town Dock; (4) Boston Common; (5) Castle Island.

the site of his own domestic economy, likely overseen by his wives Martha Willett (who died in 1678), Elizabeth Lidget (who died in 1687), and Rebecca Lee.⁴⁰ It was probably from these estates that Saffin wrote a letter on June 12, 1681, which shows how New England's emerging racial infrastructure included the transatlantic slave trade.⁴¹ Saffin explains that he and four associates arranged in 1680 for the ship *Elizabeth* to sail for Guinea and return with enslaved Africans. This venture would have been in violation of the Royal African Company's monopoly on slave trading, so the ship upon its return would have to evade Rhode Island officials to deliver its captives. The letter instructs their agent, William Welstead, to watch for the *Elizabeth's* return, make contact with its captain, William Warren, and smuggle the human cargo ashore at Nantasket under cover of darkness. Calculating that the profit to be gained from this venture was worth the risks of smuggling, Saffin and his coconspirators reveal another way colonial New England relied on racial infrastructures: beneath the

building of roads, ports, and the cultivation of crops, the illicit traffic in slaves fed the settlers' thirst for labor. So while Saffin decried Adam for leaving his "house by stealth," he matter-of-factly told Welstead to act "with what privacy you can . . . [and] keepe your men Ignorant" of his own illegal slave trading. The former "stealth" threatened the racial infrastructure white settlers like Saffin were developing; the latter "privacy" supported that very development.⁴² We thus have two different models of possession, from the settler perspective: illicit, self-directed Black movement and licit white privacy.

Scholarship tends to separate the transatlantic slave trade from Native Americans in a way that would lead us to connect Saffin's letter to Adam's life without considering Indigenous life, but that would be inaccurate. As Margaret Ellen Newell explains, "Native Americans constituted the vast majority of those enslaved by European regimes in the Americas prior to 1700" and "Colonial New England was no exception to this rule."⁴³ The aftermath of King Philip's War in particular saw a wave of Indian enslavement and executions as settlers treated Native people in the region as captives in a just war, a key legal justification for slavery. Recall that Metacom's wife and son were sold into slavery in Bermuda. Crucially, this was all integrated into colonial commoning. Some captives were sold at public auctions, with the profits accruing to the settler government in a manner consistent with Gilmore's account of carceral geographies as a "form of public wealth." Others were executed at a town common, as Sewall explains in a diary entry from September 13, 1676: "Note, there were eight Indians shot to death on the Common, upon Wind-mill hill."⁴⁴ Adam would have been very familiar with this regime of servitude, which linked the African slave trade with Native enslavement, as it animated his everyday life.

The Town Dock

Third, a mere mile from Boston Common and half a mile from Saffin's Boston estates was the Town Dock, another node in the region's racial infrastructure and a colonial commons in its own right since it was developed by the Selectmen from taxes on, and for the use of, white settlers. Saffin owned a wharf on the dock from which he likely sent Adam in 1701 to work on Castle Island, then in Boston Harbor and the site of a fort, another colonial commons for military defense. When Adam took his time to follow Saffin's instruction, his master expressed familiar outrage: "This vile Negro after he came to *Boston*, went about Town ten or twelve days at his pleasure before he went to the Castle."⁴⁵ Saffin's own movements, both licit and illicit, come to seem normative as they are set against Adam's own "vile" movements "at his pleasure."

Once on the island, Adam got into a conflict with an official, Captain Clark. William Lee, a witness to the conflict, gives this account in his testimony to the court in October of 1701:

The said negro Shewed himself very Surley and gave Saucy Answers to said Capt. Clark refusing to observe his Directions; Whereupon the Capt. With a Small Stick which he then held in his hand struck his Tobacco-pipe out of his mouth, gave him a Shove with his hand & Struck him a blow over the Shoulders with the said Stick; the said negro in great Fury & rage Shoved the Capt. Again wrested the Stick out of his hand and broke it, & lifted up the Shovel wherewith he was at work and with the Iron upward offered a Stroke to the said Capt. Which he fended off with his Arm.⁴⁶

Another witness, John Griffin, echoes and expands upon Lee's testimony with this statement from October 9, 1701:

On Tuesday the 7th Instant, Adam a Negro man being then a Labourer at the Castle, was removing some Earth, but did it not to Captain Clark's mind, who ordered him to do it otherwise, but the said Negro refused to do it according to his Order; at which Captain Clark said you Rascal, why don't you do it as I order you; the said Negro said he was no Rogue, no Rascal, no Thief; at which Captain Clark with a stick broke his pipe, and said, you Rogue you shall do as I bid you, and gave him a push, at which said Negro gave him a push, and said, that if he struck him, he would strike him again; Captain Clark gave him a stroke or two with his stick; the Negro took hold of the Stick and brake it, and took up his Shovel and struck at Captain Clark, and had like to have spoilt him.⁴⁷

Throughout his conflict with Saffin, Adam was challenged by his overseers not for failing to work, but for working improperly: in the wrong manner, with the wrong attitude, without proper deference. Here, what Lee calls Adam's "Surley" and "Saucy Answers" turn out, according to Griffin, to be Adam's refusal to accept Clark's accusation that he is a "Rascal" and a "Rogue," which Adam apparently interpreted to mean a "Thief." These widely used seventeenth- and eighteenth-century terms impute improper movements, actions, and possessions. From the perspective of the white settlers, Adam moved improperly: he indulged his "pleasure before he went to the Castle" as Saffin puts it, or answered Clark in "surley" and "saucy" terms according to Lee. He also acted improperly: "removing some Earth" in a manner contrary to Clark's instructions. And he utilized possessions he was not meant to use in improper ways. Clark knocked Adam's "Tobacco-pipe" out of his mouth, challenging his indulgence of smoking; in turn, Adam turned Clark's stick, the iron shovel, and even his own hands from tools of work into instruments of "Fury & rage." Adam's tobacco pipe also connects this encounter to Native life, as the tobacco he was smok-

ing embodies Indigenous flora and horticultural knowledge taught to white settlers and Black people alike by Indigenous people of the Americas—the appropriation of which, of course, created a cash crop that was crucial to racial capitalist infrastructures throughout the Americas.

As I mentioned above, Larkin urges us to consider both the material and the semiotic dimensions of “built networks that structured the circulation of people, things, and knowledge.” The conflict between Saffin and Adam reveals that semiotically, circulation through Saffin’s network of properties and beyond was thoroughly racialized, which is to say not only that the region’s infrastructure was controlled by white settlers, but also that most Black and Native movement through it was understood by them as an outrage and a threat. They sought to make Adam, along with Native lives and lands, a normative feature of New England’s racial infrastructure, “fad[ing] from view, operating just ‘beneath’ (*infra*) the surface of the phenomenal world while facilitating the operations on which that world depends.”⁴⁸

“His Exorbitant Practices”

Yet Adam did not remain *infra*. He surfaces in the archive because he disrupted the operations on which early New England’s racial infrastructure depended. Determining what kind of disruption he presented is difficult, as the archive privileges white settler perspectives, and no record of Adam’s testimony in the case survives. Still, by reading the archive against its grain we can see how Adam was not merely an individual impediment to development; he also participated in collective social relations to repurpose settler infrastructure and circulate otherwise. This repurposing is something like what Gilmore has called “abolition geography”: the “capacity to recognize . . . immanent possibility as we select and reselect liberatory lineages” from the infrastructures that engulf us.⁴⁹

Saffin’s own accounts of Adam allow us mediated glimpses not only into Adam’s acts but also into the wider abolitionist context in which he acted. We have already seen how Saffin represents Adam’s diversion from Saffin’s desires: “after I was gone, he took his Cloaths out of the house by stealth, and went about the Town at his pleasure.”⁵⁰ Saffin expands on this critique of Adam’s movements in his 1703 petition to the legislature seeking Adam’s re-enslavement:

The said vile Negro is at this Day set at large to goe at his pleasure, in open Defiance of me his Master in danger of my life, he haveing threatened to be Revenged of me and all them that have cross’t his turbulent Humour, to the great Scandall and evill example of all Negros both in Town and countrey whose eyes are upon this wretched Negro to see the Issue of these his exorbitant practices.⁵¹

Saffin had already issued this last charge of exorbitance in his pamphlet *The Selling of Joseph* (1701), where he says Adam’s behavior on Boundfield was characterized by “exorbitant practices, too tedious to be mentioned.”⁵² “Exorbitant” derives from an infrastructural term: the Latin *orbita*, or wheel track. To be ex-orbitant is to move out of the well-worn and designated route, to go “off-road” as we might say today. Saffin’s repeated use of the term reflects his wariness about Adam’s actions; he dismisses those actions as “tedious” but also conceals them as unmentionable. Reading this against the grain of Saffin’s intentions—as Adam himself does by claiming that the 1694 instrument of indenture between Saffin and Shepherd guaranteed his freedom—allows us to specify how Adam’s appearance in the archive is an impression of his exorbitant insistence on restructuring early New England’s racial infrastructure. Adam pursues “pleasure” along that infrastructure’s “orbitant” roads, ports, and markets, by many means, be they stealthy or turbulent, legal or extra-legal. Let’s start with how he deviated from the expectations Saffin lays out for him in the 1694 instrument, and then consider Adam’s relationship to the land, before finally turning to the 1714 petition in support of Madam Leblond.

Some scholars call the instrument a “contract” between Saffin and Adam, while a copy of it at the Bristol Town Hall, apparently made in the nineteenth century, labels it a “Deed of Freedom.”⁵³ These names are somewhat misleading since “contract” presupposes more than one equal party to an agreement and “Deed of Freedom” describes Adam’s interpretation of the document, but not Saffin’s or Shepherd’s. The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century term “instrument” is more fitting, as it designates a legal document entailing rights and obligations, but does not presuppose the formally egalitarian structure of a contract or the unambiguous emancipation implied by “deed of freedom.” The instrument is narrated in the first person by Saffin—it begins, “I John Saffin of Bristol in the Province of the Massachusetts Bay in New England out of meer kindness to and for the Encouragement of my negro man Adam . . .”—and while he signed it, Shepherd and Adam did not.⁵⁴ Rather, they are addressed by it. So when Adam insisted that the instrument guaranteed him freedom after seven years, he did not simply describe its self-evident meaning. Rather, he transformed himself from an addressee of the agreement into a party to the agreement; his citational reiteration of the document overrode Saffin’s narrative voice. Adam’s exorbitant performative proved felicitous—he won his case. But this was not a victory of contractual equality, for Adam was not an equal party to the arrangement. Nor was it merely the triumph of a self-evident truth, since the freedom Adam secured was far from secure; as we have seen, his “free” labor was later subject to appropriation by the Boston Selectmen for their colonial commoning. Rather,

Adam's performative transformation of the instrument was exorbitant in that it traveled outside the track of New England's racial capitalist social relations and did not follow a liberal route to formal and abstract equality.

Saffin repeatedly argued during the legal dispute that the instrument did not merely require Adam to work for a set period of time but also defined the manner in which he was expected to work. In this, Saffin lays out the *orbita* that colonial New England's racial infrastructure demanded Black labor follow. As I have discussed at length elsewhere, Saffin insists that Adam work with a certain affect: "Allways provided that the said Adam my servant do in the mean time go on chearfully quietly and Industriously in the Lawfull Business that either my Self or my Assigns shall from time to time reasonably Sett him about or employ him in and doe behave and abear himself as an Honest true and faithful Servant ought to doe during the Tearn of Seven years as aforesaid."⁵⁵ In this he aimed not simply to dispossess Adam of something Adam possessed, like his body or his labor; rather, Saffin aimed to possess Adam with, impute to him, or conjure in him a desire for enslaved labor. Saffin effectively sought to give Adam what he then hoped to take from him: not just labor, but a love of laboring for his masters. When Adam thwarted this effort, Saffin obsessively pursued his subjection in the courts and the legislature.⁵⁶ Following Gilmore, we might call these affective demands on Adam an "infrastructure of feeling" supplementing New England's farms and roads and docks. The subjection Saffin sought from Adam—*assujettissement*, both the limitation and the animation of a subject—aimed to facilitate the proper production and circulation of goods in and through those spaces, to keep people and things on track.⁵⁷

Consequently, Saffin is constantly enraged at the exorbitant ways Adam moves. He decries Adam's "proud, insolent and domineering spirit" and his "cunning serpentine Genius," or his assertive and unpredictable movements. He claims that Adam "was often very Lazie and Remiss, would favour himself, and (when he could) would sliely make others bear the weight of his work." He says Adam "grew so intollerably insolent, quarrelsome and outragious," "was so vexatious and grievous," "proud and surlie," and "contentious," that Shepherd "could not indure his pertinacy," as if Adam were at once immovable and erratically mobile.⁵⁸ These improper movements seem to have reached a head after Adam left Saffin's "house by stealth" and took to "swaggering at his pleasure" "to the great scandall and evill example of all Negros both in Town and countrey whose eyes are upon this wretched Negro to see this Issue of his exorbitant practices."⁵⁹ Adam's movements were not just his alone; they were somehow shared, in a kind of collective spectacle. That spectacle turned Saffin's world upside down such that he complains he was "made a meer Vassall to his slave."⁶⁰

Shepherd also attacks Adam's exorbitance, calling him "a vile Refractory fellow."⁶¹ Like Saffin's term "pertinacy" or his combination of "insolent" and "serpentine," "refractory" paradoxically meant both stubborn and erratic, indicating someone who was both immovable as well as recklessly in motion. In seventeenth-century medical discourse, "refractory" could also refer to a disease or wound that was incurable, and in metallurgy it indicates materials that resist heat and are difficult to work, but can also be powerful conduits.⁶² Adam did not just move in problematic ways, then: his movements threatened the very principles of circulation white settler infrastructure required.

Two documents filed in the case shed further light on Adam's exorbitant movements. The first is a statement from the Court of Common Pleas in Boston in 1702: it "Comand[s]" that Saffin appear "to answer to Adam negroe of Boston with in our said County of Suffolk Labourer in a plea for that whereas the said Adam hath Complained unto us That he being a freeman and ready to prove his liberty, the said John Saffin claimeing him as his slave, doth unjustly vex him."⁶³ "To vex," a common legal term of the period, meant to trouble, distress, worry, annoy, or even to harass with a specific instrument.⁶⁴ The second is a 1703 filing under the names of Adam and his lawyer, Thomas Newton: "The said Adam Negro pleads that he oweth the said John Saffin no Service but is free by Vertue of an Instrument under the hand and Seal of the said John Saffin."⁶⁵ These bare statements suggest that Adam instrumentalized the instrument Saffin himself drafted—the document indenturing Adam to Shepherd—in a bid to "prove his liberty." That bid refuted the "vexatiousness" his master accused him of and turned Saffin into the instrument of Adam's own vexation, the obstacle to his aims. Those aims are not entirely clear in these statements, but they appear at least as a negation of Saffin's mastery ("no Service") and a movement toward another way of being ("ready to prove his liberty" as "a freeman," one who "is free").

Adam's relationship to the land also took exorbitant forms. Indeed, in *The Selling of Joseph*, Saffin declares Adam "so intollerably insolent, quarrelsome and outrageous, that the Earth could not bear his rudeness." What was this "rude" relation to the earth? While under Shepherd's control at Boundfield, Saffin says Adam was allowed to "have a piece of rich ground to plant Tobacco in, by which the said Negro made (as I am informed) above *Three Pounds* a year, besides his own use." Additionally, after leaving Boundfield in 1699 for Saffin's Boston estates, Adam "had nothing to do but to work in the Garden, make fires and the like."⁶⁶ Though provision grounds or slave plots were envisioned by slave owners as ways to make the enslaved share some of the expense of their own sustenance as well as learn the value of laboring for oneself, they have also long been considered collective scenes of resistance to chattel slavery.⁶⁷

Sylvia Wynter famously situated slave plots in a “plantation-plot dichotomy,” in which the “plot system” became “the focus of resistance to the market system and market values” as “African peasants transplanted to the plot all the structure of values that had been created by traditional societies of Africa” such that “the land remained the Earth” and “[t]his folk culture became a source of cultural guerilla resistance to the plantation system.” Crucially, for Wynter these “traditional” values, when “transplanted to the plot,” were not pure African survivals untouched by the plantation. Rather, they transformed and were transformed by their agonistic articulation with the plantation: “We accept folk culture as a point outside the system where the traditional values can give us a focus of criticism against the impossible reality in which we are enmeshed. But there is no question of going back to a society, a folk pattern whose structure has already been undermined by the pervasive market economy.” Wynter’s “plot” was not just empirical knowledge of African plants or planting methods (say, of yams or diverse intercropping); it was also a “focus of criticism” or a collective critical orientation toward the plantation system. For instance, the plot challenged individual property: “The law of the plantation is based on the rights of property. The justice of the peasant is based on the needs of the people who form the community.”⁶⁸ The plot signifies a praxis that tends toward poiesis, a social activity that might just bring into being something that did not previously exist.⁶⁹

In an exchange with Adom Getachew, Christopher Taylor has emphasized the ambivalent nature of Wynter’s “plantation-plot dichotomy,” as echoed also by Ken Post, fleshing out the manner in which the plot does not so much stand apart from the plantation as repurpose it:

The plot, as Wynter and Post both suggest, cannot simply be opposed to the plantation because 1) it was posited by the plantation as the latter’s means of demonetizing subsistence and because 2) it provided the material scaffolding of the plantation. This is to say, then, that the plantation, as an ordinary part of its functioning, as a necessary part of its reproduction, immanently generated “a non-capitalist element.”⁷⁰

In “The Plantation Road to Socialism,” Taylor goes even further to “show how black thinkers and subaltern political agents seized upon aspects of the plantation’s quotidian functioning—features that derived from the plantation’s immanent exteriority to the value relations of capitalism—as the institutional basis for a transition from plantation slavery to socialism.”⁷¹ Taylor’s study of Jamaican smallholders who organized a cooperative farming system in 1865 “by hewing to a model provided by the plantation” reveals a repurposing of the plantation from within, “a cooperatively-governed social order opposed to market imperatives,

waged labor, and subsistence insecurity.”⁷² This is no romantic commons delinked from the plantation; rather, it is an immanent apposition, a critical orientation toward racial capitalist infrastructures within which the enslaved were embedded.

What Saffin called Adam’s rude relation to the earth can be placed in this trajectory of thought and action. A difference might seem to be that Adam’s efforts appear individual rather than collective, but we must remember that appearance is Saffin’s doing: “He was often very Lazy and Remiss, would favor himself, and (when he could) would sliely make others bear the weight of the work.”⁷³ Indeed, Saffin even represents the kind of freedom he proposed to bestow on Adam, should Adam follow the terms of the instrument of indenture to Shepherd, as essentially individual: “For his own benefit . . . and for his encouragement therein, I promised him his Freedom.”⁷⁴ But Adam’s plots were anything but individual. When Saffin says “the said Negro made (as I am informed) above *Three Pounds* a year, besides his own use” from growing tobacco at Boundfield, he reveals Adam’s multiyear involvement in local markets which Saffin seems only to have heard about. Those markets were populated by Black and Native people as well as white settlers, serving as contact zones for people instrumentalized by the plantation economy’s appropriation of their land and labor. They functioned at a different scale and allowed for different interests and desires than large landowners and wealthy merchants like Saffin pursued.

At one point in “Novel and History, Plot and Plantation,” Wynter’s syntax thickens in a difficult-to-read sentence that can help us better understand the sociality of Adam’s plots: “No aspect in which the attitudes and values of the dominant ‘creole-colon plantation structure,’ is not used is an essentially exploitative relation to the indigenous plot values.”⁷⁵ By “indigenous,” Wynter seems to mean, here and throughout her essay, “all the structure of values that had been created by traditional societies of Africa” and were brought to plots cultivated by “African peasants” forced into servitude in the Americas. So in one sense, Wynter’s sentence claims that the plantation structure imposed on the Americas after 1492 exploited African relationships to the land, which is surely correct. But the double negation of the “no . . . not” and the lingering comma after “creole-colon plantation structure” resist quick comprehension. That difficulty can point us to people Indigenous to the Americas, who do not appear explicitly in “Novel and History, Plot and Plantation” but who without question are beneath (infra) the structures it examines. For instance, perhaps markets like the ones where Adam earned “above *Three Pounds* a year” from the produce of his plots, in and around Bristol and Boston, brought him into contact with Native people who taught him how best to grow tobacco, which was native to the Americas, in “rich earth” that dif-

ferred from what most “African peasants” knew. Perhaps even the tobacco he was smoking in the pipe Captain Clark struck out of his mouth on Castle Island came from his own provisions, a thread of pleasure connecting his labor to his plots and his local market encounters, allowing him to feel his way through the capricious demands of settlers and masters animated by their own infrastructures of feeling.

Perhaps, too, it was in and around such local markets that Adam met Madam Leblond as well as Dick, Ned Hubbard, Robin Keats, and Mingo Walker. Perhaps they all came up with the idea of writing a petition to the Boston Selectmen in these exorbitant spaces.

Ante-Commons

A risk of focusing on the legal case between Adam and Saffin is that it emphasizes a dispute between two individuals rather than the polyphonic social world in which Adam and Saffin were embedded. In previous work on the case, I may have fallen into this trap. That is why I have tried here to read the case as just one part of a larger conflict over New England’s racial infrastructure, rather than as a privileged scene in which heroic or villainous individuals act as singular agents. Another indication of this larger scene appears in the records of the Superior Court session that took up Adam’s case in Boston in May 1701. Since Adam was still technically enslaved to Saffin, but also had to appear in court for a hearing, a free Black man named Dick agreed to serve as surety in Adam’s recognizance; in other words, Dick agreed to be the bond for Adam’s return to the court, lest Adam flee.⁷⁶ This is perhaps the same Dick who appears in my epigraphs alongside Adam in the 1708 roadwork draft and in the 1714 petition in support of Madam Leblond. If so, he clearly had a long-term relationship with Adam; he also reveals himself to have been adept at negotiating the colony’s legal system to help his friend. Suretyship is an ancient practice that long predates capitalism, much less colonial law in New England. Indeed, it is often referenced in the Bible, so Dick could have had multiple inspirations for backing Adam in this way.⁷⁷ The 1714 petition expresses a similar logic of surety, though in an even more collective form than Dick’s support for Adam.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, it is not entirely clear who Madam Leblond was or why Dick, Ned Hubbard, Robin Keats, Mingo Walker, and Adam wanted to support her. Some scholarly references to this petition claim she was enslaved, but I have not found any definitive indication of that.⁷⁸ A 1714 “List of Innholders and Retailers of Spirits in Boston” names an Anne Leblond as a “retailer without doors,” which means she sold spirits but did not have her own inn or tavern.⁷⁹ Might this be the Madam Leblond of the petition? If so, perhaps the peti-

tioners forged a relationship with her through the conviviality of drink, apposite to the relentless work that defined so much of their lives. This possibility recalls John Hughson’s tavern, which featured so prominently as a gathering site for “the White and Black Persons arrested” in Daniel Horsmanden’s narrative of the so-called New York Conspiracy of 1741, subtitled *A Journal of the Proceedings in the Detection of the Conspiracy Formed by Some White People, in Conjunction with Negro and Other Slaves, for Burning the City of New-York in America, and Murdering the Inhabitants*.⁸⁰ We might then imagine the petitioners within the world of Moten’s reanimation of that tavern in his poem “hughson’s tavern”:

*where they exercised
“the hopes and promise
of paradise”*⁸¹

Crucially, the petition’s “where” would be more a world of the plot than a world of the commons, or perhaps a world of commoning more in line with Wynter’s plot than today’s romantic renderings of the commons, since it was immanently generated within social relations of work and exchange rather than set entirely apart from or in opposition to those relations.

Alternately, among the documents settling the estate of James Leblond, a Boston merchant who died in 1713 and designated his wife Ann Leblond as his executrix, is an inventory of possessions from 1719 that lists “One negro woman and one Indian boy” (between “five pillows” and “a Cow”); an earlier version of that inventory lists “a negroe woman named Sue and Child” (between an item of copper and a plate).⁸² Sewall, Adam’s supporter in the case against Saffin, is named as the probate judge. It is possible that the Madam Leblond mentioned in the 1714 petition was this “negro woman named Sue” enslaved to the James Leblond who died in 1713, suggesting a motive for the petitioners’ effort to support her: perhaps the death of her master left her needing help. That Sue’s child is also listed as Indian amplifies not only the simultaneity of Indigenous and Black servitude but also the intertwined lives of Black and Native people I have stressed throughout this essay. I have not as yet been able to determine much about the other signers of the 1714 petition, although all appear on the public works drafts of free Blacks throughout the early eighteenth century, and Mingo Walker applied to become a chimney sweep in December 1719.⁸³

The Boston Selectmen’s extensive, ongoing efforts to develop colonial New England’s infrastructure by forging private and collective white settler possessions out of Black and Indigenous land and labor did not simply put people of color—to use a common eighteenth-century term—to

work for settler profits. Those efforts also gave meaning to race, fleshing it out as an instrument that could invest people and things, their circulation, and the relationships among them with conceptual coherence, laying tracks for their proper movement. When those Selectmen denied the 1714 petition, they laid more tracks to divert from the exorbitant infrastructure in Black in their midst.

What is an infrastructure in Black? Dick, Ned Hubbard, Robin Keats, Mingo Walker, Adam, and Madam Leblond sought to repurpose New England's racial infrastructure. Rather than seeking individual possessions or even a commons for their exclusive use, subtended by the lives, lands, and labors of infra-others, their 1714 petition imagined a social relation of care that might thrive in the midst of possessions forged out of dispossession. The petition did not seek to regain something they lost or that had been stolen from them so much as it sought another way of living what the Selectmen called "negro" and "negero." Declaring themselves "willing to be bound" so that Madam Leblond "shall be Noe ways Chargeable to ye town In Sickness or any disaster," they forged a quotidian, situational, and collective will to remove her from Boston's charge. If the region's emerging racial infrastructure was a form of public wealth with its own structures of feeling, a colonial commons alongside individual possessions and possessive individualisms, then this collective might best be called an ante-commons.⁸⁴ It sought to be at once before, against, and apposite to the colonial commons: before, because it acted in a colonial world that had not been entirely subsumed under racial capital's form of value; against, because it refused to remain infra the structures of public wealth; and apposite, because it aimed to operate alongside those structures, keeping track of them without remaining in their tracks. "The hopes and promise of paradise" this collective "exercised" remain precisely that today: hopes and promises animating ongoing struggles against both dispossession and possession, exorbitant practices at once imagined and lived.

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Notes

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1. Whitmore and Appleton, *Report*, 72–73.
2. *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, “Proposal of Several Negroes in Boston, 1714,” 115.
3. Nemser, *Infrastructures of Race*, 4. On infrastructure, see Anand et al., *Promise of Infrastructure*; Bissell, “Colonial Constructions”; Easterling, *Extrastatecraft*; Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*; Hurley and Insko, “The Infrastructure of Emergency”; Kopec, “War on Dirt”; LaDuke and Cowen, “Beyond Wiindigo Infrastructure”; Larkin, “Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure”; Mitchell, “Infrastructures Work on Time”; Robbins, “Smell of Infrastructure”; Rowan, “Hard-Boiled Anthropocene”; Siddique, “Archival Epistemology”; Simone, “People as Infrastructure”; Stinson, “Bondage and Resistance”; Yaeger, “Introduction: Dreaming of Infrastructure”; Zelnik, “Self-Evident Walls.”
4. Nemser, *Infrastructures of Race*, 16–17.
5. Larkin, “Promising Forms,” 175–202.
6. Nemser, *Infrastructures of Race*, 18. Holt, “Marking.”
7. Adam Saffin’s surname, from his master John Saffin, is misprinted as “Laffin.”
8. Judy, *Sentient Flesh*, 19. I also discuss this kind of poiesis in my “Ante-Possession.”
9. Linebaugh, *Stop, Thief!*, 13–15. The literature on the commons is vast. Consider, for instance, Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies, *Subsistence Perspective*; Bollier and Helfrich, *Wealth of the Commons*; Casarino and Negri, *In Praise of the Common*; Federici, “Women”; Federici, “Witch-Hunting”; Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World*; Linebaugh, *Magna Carta Manifesto*; Thompson, *Customs in Common*.
10. Wheildon, *Sentry, or Beacon Hill*, 10.
11. Greer, *Property and Dispossession*, 241–70.
12. Moten, “hughson’s tavern,” 13.
13. Saffin, *Brief and Candid Answer*; Sewall, *Selling of Joseph*.
14. Binder, “Slavery of Emancipation”; Blanton, “This Species of Property”; Bush, “Free to Enslave”; Couchman, “Characterizing Slavery”; Foster, *Witnessing Slavery*; Francis, *Judge Sewall’s Apology*; Kopelson, *Faithful Bodies*; Sewall, “Selling of Joseph”; Plane, *Colonial Intimacies*; Plass, “‘So Succeeded’”; Sands, “John Saffin”; Smith, *Conjuring Culture*; Towner, “Sewall-Saffin Dialogue on Slavery”; Von Frank, “John Saffin”; Warren, *New England Bound*.
15. Johnson, “On Agency.”
16. For scholarship on this intercalation, principally in the nineteenth century, see Eure, “Grammar of Kinship”; Forbes, *Africans and Native Americans*; King, *Black Shoals*; Miles, *Ties that Bind*; Naylor, *African Cherokees in Indian Territory*.
17. Larkin, “Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure,” 328–29.
18. Larkin, “Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure,” 333.
19. Gilmore, epigraph for *Prison/Culture*. Gilmore is reworking Raymond Williams’s notion of a structure of feeling; see Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*. For more on “public ownership” as “an unseen facet of American slavery and state development,” see Hall, “Slaves of the State,” as well as Balogh, *Government Out of Sight*; Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*; Mann, “Autonomous Power of the State”; Novak, “Myth of the ‘Weak’ American State”; O’Donovan, “Thinking about the Political Lives of Slaves.”

20. Larkin, "Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure," 329–30.
21. Massachusetts Archives, Suffolk Court Files; Goodell, "John Saffin." I have compared Goodell's transcriptions with the original documents, and quoted from the latter wherever possible. A few of these documents have recently been republished in Hutchins and Smith, *Earliest African American Literature*, 61–67.
22. Saffin, *John Saffin, His Book*; Saffin, *Brief and Candid Answer*; Sewall, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*; Sewall, *Selling of Joseph*; *Second Report*, 2–3; Whitmore and Appleton, *Report*; Town Records of Bristol, RI, and Warren, RI.
23. Massachusetts Archives, Suffolk Court Files; Goodell, "John Saffin," 104. Bristol's first census, from February 1689, shows Saffin to be the master of eight servants. While the race of those servants is not noted, one other servant in the town, owned by Capt. Nathaniel Byfield, is noted as "Black" and is listed separately from Byfield's other ten servants, whose races are not noted. This seems to suggest that all the other servants in town in 1689, including Saffin's, were white, and thus that Saffin did not yet own Adam, at least in Bristol. For the Bristol census, see Bowen, *Early Rehoboth*, 75–76. Also cited in Sands, "John Saffin," 94; and Von Frank, "John Saffin," 257.
24. Massachusetts Archives, Suffolk Court Files; Goodell, "John Saffin," 88.
25. Massachusetts Archives, Suffolk Court Files; Goodell, "John Saffin," 105.
26. Massachusetts Archives, Suffolk Court Files; Goodell, "John Saffin," 106.
27. Whitmore and Appleton, *Report*, 232–33. Adam appears at least seven times on these work rolls between 1708 and 1715.
28. One of Saffin's estates in Boston was located on Hanover St. at Union St. and Blackstone St., and the other was less than a quarter mile away at the site of the current John F. Kennedy Federal Building. Goodell, "John Saffin," 87.
29. A December 1680 deed for the transfer of land in the area from Nathaniel Paine to William Throop references Saffin's land: "Thirty acres more or less of land bounded easterly by Highway from Bristol to Swanzey, south by land of Solomon Curtis, west by the sea, north by land of John Saffin, excepting such meadow lying within said bounds as was formerly purchased of the Indians, also about an acre, sold to John Saffin" (Bristol Historical and Preservation Society). The first reference to Saffin's land being called Boundfield comes in his diary, from March 23, 1687 or 1688: "Memorandum That On the 23rd of March Ano 1687/8 I landed my Goods & Household Stuff at my house att Boundfield in the Township of Bristol." The next entry, from March 1688, mentions that he "began to plant my Orchard at Boundfield and finished it in 1691" (Saffin, *John Saffin, His Book*, 11). A deed from 1689 in which William Bradford sells Saffin additional land also mentions Boundfield: "All that mesuage or tenement known by the name of Boundfield, on Mount Hope Neck in townships of Bristol & Swanzey partly on both sides of the line which divides said towns, bounded toward the east by Highway leading to Bristol, south upon lands of Nathaniel Paine and Solomon Curtis, west by Swanzey river and north by lands of Jno. Thurber" (Bristol Historical and Preservation Society). Saffin's will suggests he purchased the land from the Narragansetts; see reference to the will as case number 3264 in *Index to the Probate Records of the County of Suffolk, Massachusetts*, 121. A copy of the will itself was provided to me by the Bristol Historical and Preservation Society, from the manuscript *Massachusetts Will and Probate, Suffolk County Probate*, vol. 17–18, 1709–1715, case number 3264, pp. 84–86.
30. "Pokanoket Nation Responds to Brown University"; "Statement from the Pokanoket Tribe."
31. Bromberg and Bertness, "Reconstructing"; Pastore, *Between Land and Sea*; Smith et al., "Salt Marshes."

32. Anderson, “Chickwallop and the Beast” and “King Philip’s Herds”; Cronon, *Changes in the Land*; Crosby, *Columbian Exchange and Ecological Imperialism*; Denevan, “After 1492”; Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*; Greer, *Property and Dispossession*; Hall, “Slaves of the State”; Melville, *Plague of Sheep*; Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions*.
33. Kempe, “New England Water Supplies.”
34. *Second Report*, 2–3.
35. Adams, *Boston Common*; Ayer, *Boston Common*; Barber, *Boston Common*; Howe, *Boston Common*; Kennedy, *Planning the City*; *Boston Common in the Seventeenth Century*; Shurtleff, *Topographical and Historical Description*; Thwing, *Crooked and Narrow Streets*; US Dept. of the Interior, “Boston Common;” *Public Rights in Boston Common*.
36. Brooks, *Our Beloved Kin*, 8. See also Lepore, *Name of War*; DeLucia, *Memory Lands*.
37. Brooks, *Our Beloved Kin*, 12–13.
38. Brooks, *Our Beloved Kin*, 6.
39. Anderson, “Chickwallop and the Beast,” 24–25. Anderson references Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*.
40. Goodell, “John Saffin,” 86.
41. For a comprehensive bibliography of historical research on slavery in New England, see Warren, “Slavery in New England.” See also *Forgotten History*.
42. Kidder, “Slave Trade in Massachusetts,” 75–76. The letter is also reproduced in Donnan, *Documents Illustrative*, 15–16, and in Sands, “John Saffin,” 71–72. See also Von Frank, “John Saffin,” 256–57.
43. Newell, “Changing Nature of Indian Slavery,” 106. On Indigenous slavery, see also Lepore, *Name of War*; Gallay and Yankelovich, *Indian Slave Trade*; Magnaghi, *Indian Slavery*; Marshall, “Melancholy People”; Newell, *Brethren by Nature*; Sainsbury, “Indian Labor in Early Rhode Island”; Usner, *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves*; Welburn, “Other Middle Passage”; Wood, “Indian Servitude in the Southeast.”
44. Sewall, *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 1:21. See also Brooks, *Our Beloved Kin*, 337.
45. Massachusetts Archives, Suffolk Court Files; Goodell, “John Saffin,” 111.
46. Massachusetts Archives, Suffolk Court Files; Goodell, “John Saffin,” 112–13.
47. Massachusetts Archives, Suffolk Court Files; Goodell, “John Saffin,” 112.
48. Nemser, *Infrastructures of Race*, 16.
49. Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*. For a brilliant study of abolition geographies in early America, see Batra, “Radiant Ephemera.”
50. Massachusetts Archives, Suffolk Court Files; Goodell, “John Saffin,” 105.
51. Massachusetts Archives, Suffolk Court Files; Goodell, “John Saffin,” 96.
52. Massachusetts Archives, Suffolk Court Files; Goodell, “John Saffin,” 104.
53. John Saffin, “Deed of Freedom,” Bristol Historical and Preservation Society.
54. Three witnesses affirmed the document: Rachel Browne (who signs only with “her marke”), Richard Smith, and Samuel Gallop. It was recorded in the Suffolk Court Records by John Cary, and that recording’s entry into the court record by Saffin was attested by a lawyer named Elisha Cooke. Massachusetts Archives, Suffolk Court Files.
55. Massachusetts Archives, Suffolk Court Files [image 0827]; Goodell, “John Saffin,” 88.
56. Kazanjian, “Dispossession.” See also Kazanjian, ““To See the Issue.””

57. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 24, 221.
58. Massachusetts Archives, Suffolk Court Files; Goodell, “John Saffin,” 104–5.
59. Massachusetts Archives, Suffolk Court Files; Goodell, “John Saffin,” 106.
60. Massachusetts Archives, Suffolk Court Files; Goodell, “John Saffin,” 96.
61. Massachusetts Archives, Suffolk Court Files; Goodell, “John Saffin,” 108.
62. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “refractory,” https://www.oed.com/dictionary/refractory_adj?tab=meaning_and_use#26153545 (accessed September 24, 2023).
63. Massachusetts Archives, Suffolk Court Files; Goodell, “John Saffin,” 93.
64. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “vex,” https://www.oed.com/dictionary/vex_v?tab=meaning_and_use#15816556 (accessed September 24, 2023).
65. Massachusetts Archives, Suffolk Court Files; Goodell, “John Saffin,” 97.
66. Massachusetts Archives, Suffolk Court Files; Goodell, “John Saffin,” 104–105.
67. Berlin and Morgan, *Slaves’ Economy and Cultivation and Culture*; Loichot, “Between Breadfruit and Masala”; DeLoughrey, “Yams, Roots, and Rot”; Mintz, “Caribbean Marketplaces and Caribbean History”; Mintz and Hall, “Origins of the Jamaican Internal Marketing System”; Parry, “Plantation and Provision Ground”; Shepherd and Beckles, *Caribbean Slavery*.
68. Wynter, “Novel and History,” 99–100.
69. On poesis, see Agamben, *Man without Content*, 68–93; Bernstein, *Fate of Art*; Cascardi and Middlebrook, *Poiesis and Modernity*; Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 15–86; Kazanjian, “Ante-Possession”; Nancy, *Muses*; Judy, *Sentient Flesh*. See also Bianchi, “Black Studies, Aristotle, Feminism.”
70. Getachew and Taylor, “Global Plantation”; Post, *Arise Ye Starvelings*. See also Goffe, “Reproducing the Plot.”
71. Taylor, “Plantation Road to Socialism,” 554.
72. Taylor, “Plantation Road to Socialism,” 554, 551.
73. Massachusetts Archives, Suffolk Court Files; Goodell, “John Saffin,” 104.
74. Massachusetts Archives, Suffolk Court Files; Goodell, “John Saffin,” 104.
75. Wynter, “Novel and History,” 102.
76. Massachusetts Archives, Suffolk Court Files; Goodell, “John Saffin,” 90.
77. Morgan, “History and Economics of Suretyship.”
78. Plass, “‘So Succeeded,’” 52–53. Blanton claims that Madam Leblond was “a recently arrived free black settler,” but I cannot find any evidence of that. Blanton also mentions “a Robin Leblond (also spelled Labloom and Lablong), perhaps Madam Lablond’s husband, [who] appears on the registers of free blacks required to do public labor between 1718 and 1725” (Blanton, “This Species of Property,” 352). Robin Leblond also appears on a number of public work drafts during this period; see Whitmore, *Report*, 42, 60, 83, 109.
79. Colburn, “List of Innholders and Retailers,” 108.
80. Horsmanden, *New York Conspiracy*.
81. Moten, “hughson’s tavern,” 13. Moten references a line from Horsmanden’s text in which Horsmanden decries the oath the conspirators supposedly declared to each other to prove and sustain their collective commitment: “The hopes and promises of paradise for doing the devil’s work, is no new invention of worldly, wicked and blood-thirsty politicians, for involving such as they are pleased to style heretics, in butchery and destruction” (Horsmanden, *New York Conspiracy*, 112).
82. The earlier copy of the inventory: Suffolk County, MA: Probate File Papers. Online database AmericanAncestors.org. New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2017–19. (From records supplied by the Massachusetts Supreme

Judicial Court Archives. Digitized images provided by FamilySearch.org.) <https://www.americanancestors.org/DB2735/i/48703/3515-co5/69465118>. The later copy of the inventory: Suffolk County, MA: Probate File Papers. Online database AmericanAncestors.org. New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2017–19. (From records supplied by the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court Archives. Digitized images provided by FamilySearch.org.) <https://www.americanancestors.org/DB2735/i/48703/3515-co13/69465126>.

83. Whitmore, *Report*, 62; Blanton, “This Species of Property,” 464.

84. On the “ante-,” see Harney and Moten, “Black (Ante)Heroism”; Moten, “Case of Blackness”; 177–218; Sexton, “Ante-Anti-Blackness: Afterthoughts.” “Ante-commons” has some relation to Harney and Moten’s “undercommons,” though the “under” seems to be after something less historical and more ongoingly infra than the efforts I am after here, which emerge from “beneath” both the archive to us today and the racial infrastructure of the turn of the eighteenth century to social relations then. “Ante-commons” thus engage “before,” “alongside,” and “against” rather than “under.” See Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*.

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