

## **MY FIRST 400 YEARS**

by Erik Michael Younge

This year marks the 400th anniversary of the first enslaved Africans in English North America. On August 25, 1619, some 20 African men and women captured aboard an English privateer ship landed at Point Comfort in Hampton, Virginia, marking 246 years of unpaid servitude, brutality, rape, torture, horror and death. "Slavery is an indelible stain on America's soul. Slavery is the biggest human transgression perpetrated by one human being on another," states Calvin Pearson, founder of Project 1619 Inc.

'Official' slavery ended in 1865. Black Reconstruction (1860 – 1880) followed "in which Black Folks played the major part in the attempt to reconstruct true democracy in America," wrote W.E.B. DuBois. The betrayal of Black Reconstruction was followed by "Jim Crow" laws of brutal segregation, discrimination, denial of human and civil rights sanctioned and enforced by the US government at all levels until officially repealed in 1965.

In most aspects of life, the chains of slavery and Jim Crow have been replaced by forced poverty, racial profiling, mis-education, economic exploitation, unhealthy toxic environments, drugs and human trafficking.

Let's get personal for a moment. I was born in 1952 in San Francisco, in the Hunters Point projects, an economically-deprived section of Black SF. My father was away in Germany serving out the Korean conflict. My mother raised me with a strong sense of self-worth (it bordered on lower arrogance), a love of learning (education was not to be "trifled with, young man"); a joyous love of history, music, culture, geography, respect for animals, respect for females, elders, teachers, and Catholic nuns. The Catholic Church was really the only one that wanted to teach us Black, Brown, Japanese children of San Francisco's working class, and poor families.

Our family structure was paramount. The sense of a strong, supportive, tightly knit "African Village Family" was pretty solid. A slightly revolutionary Catholic education combined with a growing belief in social justice was nourished at a young age. My Afrikan American Awareness new life exploded in two major ways. I heard the words of Malcolm X and they planted their seeds in me. I devoured the books by and about Brother Malcolm religiously. I cried openly when Malcolm was assassinated in Feb. 1965. The other blast was seeing the images of Black Manhood & Black Sisterhood exhibited by the Black Panther Party For Self Defense, started by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in October of 1966 in Oakland, Ca.

It was like being hit by a Black thunderbolt. I joined the Party at the age of 15 (I may have lied about my age!). I was re-educated, began to find myself, and corrected my mental attitude. I was steered towards healthy character, good morals, ethics, the understanding of humane love, and the greater purpose of fighting for justice and serving the needs of others. My body, soul, heart and mind were forever cemented in fighting for complete equality and freedom, and the beauty of living for My people.

This brings me to today and the principal fight of my life: The fight to end racism. As a member of the Ending Racism Task Force (ERTF), a subcommittee of the Philadelphia Ethical Society, I join other good saints of diverse races who are firmly committed to understanding and ending this deadly disease of racism that grew out of economic American slavery and now sadly engulfs the world with its poison. It must be eradicated. Like any disease, it can be cured. We were not born with the disease and it can and will be destroyed. I end with the idea that I am one with the 400 year fight against slavery with all the Afrikans brought in chains to these shores. I share their pains, sufferings, beatings, the rapes, the lynchings, burnings, economic exploitation, the police brutality, homelessness, the unemployment, all the brutality over the 400 years.

But I also share the most important parts: the heroic resiliency that has helped us to survive all the hate, a resiliency of courage that shines a beacon around the world for all oppressed, wounded, unhealthy people. I share our history, culture of pure beauty, our remarkable achievements of body, mind, soul, spirituality, and the Black love of Afrikan people everywhere in the Diaspora.

In 1972, I traveled to Ghana, the beginning of my family's road to the Americas, looking to find my ancestral connections and the burden of commitment, both a blessing and a curse. I was given a warm welcome and this prayer. "You will always be a child of Africa. Say a prayer of gratitude for your life and everything the Ancestors have given you. You cannot take The Motherland with you on your shoulders. But Mother Afrika will never leave you. She is a part of all you are."

And so I will begin the next 400 Years of African-American History on August 25, 2019. Peace, Soul & Love!