

The wages of acclimation: presumed black immunity to yellow fever and the racial politics of burial labour in 1855 Portsmouth and Norfolk, Virginia

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Abstract

Epidemic disease regularly tore through nineteenth-century American cities, triggering public health crises and economic upheaval. These epidemic panics also provoked new racialised labour regimes, affecting the lives of innumerable working people. During yellow fever outbreaks, white authorities and employers preferred workers of colour over ‘unacclimated’ white immigrants, reflecting a common but mistaken belief in black invulnerability. This article chronicles enslaved burial labourers in antebellum Virginia, who leveraged this notion to seize various privileges – and nearly freedom. These episodes demonstrate that black labour, though not always black suffering or lives, mattered immensely to white officials managing these urban crises. Black workers were not mere tools for protecting white wealth and health, however, as they often risked torment and death to capitalise on employers’ desperation for their essential labour. This history exposes racial and socioeconomic divergence between those able to shelter or flee from infection, and those compelled to remain exposed and exploitable.

Key words: epidemics, disease, race, slavery, urban, American South

Introduction: working feverishly

On 19 January 1859 a forty-three-year-old enslaved man ‘commonly known’ as Bob Butt dictated and made his mark on an appeal ‘to the philanthropic’ inhabitants of Philadelphia. Butt’s letter boldly explained that though he had travelled to Philadelphia ‘by permission of his master’ in Portsmouth, Virginia, he was ‘earnestly anxious to free himself and his wife and two children from servitude, and begs leave to appeal to the well known generosity of the people of this great city for assistance’. Butt expounded that both his owner and that of his family had agreed ‘to abate at least *one half* of the moneyed value they would command, and that *he* had earned and saved about *one-fifth*’ of the remaining balance. What’s more, Butt insisted, ‘the ladies and gentlemen of Portsmouth will, in some public manner or otherwise, assist him liberally in his efforts to purchase the freedom of himself and family, should he, on his return home, be able to show them that, by the kindness of the people

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of this great city, the sum remaining to be raised is within the means of his own small town.¹ By the time Bob Butt's plea for financial gifts publicly appeared in the 5 February 1859 edition of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, the official weekly organ of the American Anti-Slavery Society published concurrently in Philadelphia and New York City, the enslaved Virginian had departed the City of Brotherly Love. Days earlier, in fact, New Bern's *Daily Progress* had announced a 'DISTINGUISHED ARRIVAL AT PORTSMOUTH'. 'Bob Butt, the colored hero of Portsmouth, Va.', the paper informed coastal North Carolinians, 150 miles away, had returned to the South.²

Questions abound. Who was Bob Butt? Why had he travelled to Philadelphia during the winter of 1859? What had compelled two Virginia enslavers to consent to a 50 per cent discount for the purchase of Bob, his wife and their two children? Were white slaveholders in Portsmouth actually willing to join with philanthropists and abolitionists in the Quaker City to contribute to such a cause, and, if so, why? How had Butt already earned substantial savings, and did he amass the sum necessary to achieve liberty for himself or his family? Why wasn't this 'colored hero' (if not his family) simply granted freedom for the feat that garnered him such distinction? Perhaps most crucially, however, how had the enslaved Bob Butt achieved both geographic mobility and regional celebrity, and what were the limits of his resultant opportunities and prerogatives within Virginia's late antebellum slave society?

Robert Butt, according to the 1870 and 1880 United States censuses, was born in Virginia in 1814 or 1815.³ The historical record reveals little about the first four decades of Butt's life. Then came early autumn 1855, when on 26 September a correspondent with Richmond's *Daily Dispatch* reported the following news from Portsmouth amid one of the most devastating yellow fever outbreaks in American history:

Uncle Bob Butt, the noted grave digger was up to the city yesterday. The sight of that personage in town is considered a good omen, as he has been seldom seen since the epidemic commenced. He alone has had nine or ten men employed, night and day, burying the dead outside of the city. He is a slave, and deserves great credit for his attention to this important part of the debt due the dead.⁴

As Butt later elucidated in his 1859 petition to Philadelphians, 'The undersigned is a sexton, undertaker and grave-digger, and, as such, it was his melancholy duty to dig the graves for and bury one thousand one hundred and fifty-nine of the inhabitants of Portsmouth, in the short space of about seven weeks, in the summer of 1855, when the yellow fever desolated that afflicted town.'⁵ Despite the great majority of Portsmouth's 10,000 residents having fled during the summer, in November the influential *Charleston Medical Journal and Review* reported to public health professionals throughout the South that 'total mortality has probably been above 1000', and that during the epidemic's apex in September 2,000 of the city's 2,200 remaining white inhabitants 'were either sick or convalescing'.⁶ One official account of the epidemic in the neighbouring cities of Portsmouth and Norfolk estimated Portsmouth's death toll at 1,100 and 'the fearful mortality of three thousand one

hundred in a united population of nine thousand' remaining residents, 'a mortality of thirty-five per cent. of the whole.'⁷ Historians now approximate that in 1855 yellow fever claimed 3,200 victims in Portsmouth and Norfolk combined, meaning that Bob Butt personally buried or supervised the interment of over one-third of the total dead and nearly all of the deceased in Portsmouth. Little wonder, then, why Butt, though black and enslaved in the white supremacist and slave South, was hailed throughout the region as 'the colored hero of Portsmouth, Va.'

But what if the relentless Bob Butt achieved renown because of, and not despite, his black body? What if he had remained in Portsmouth amid a maelstrom of suffering and death not solely because he was the human chattel of his master James Brittain, who sought the profits of his bondsman's hired-out labour, but because he was black? While panicked free residents fled by the thousands, Butt was shackled to the city, and then tasked for weeks with handling plagued corpses around the clock, owing to whites' preconception of blackness when peering through the prism of yellow fever. The terror of epidemic disease that recurrently tore through nineteenth-century American cities triggered public health crises and quarantines, medical inquiry and debate and economic upheaval. But pandemic panic also precipitated novel and racialised labour policies and practices, affecting the lives and livelihoods of innumerable working people. During yellow fever epidemics alarmed white authorities and employers preferred or required workers of colour over 'unacclimated' or 'febrile' white immigrants, owing to a mistaken but prevalent belief in black immunological invulnerability to that virulent disease. In short, they favoured workers deemed seasoned or 'acclimated' and thus employable, especially within the crucible of contagion. But black labourers discerned unintended perquisites from these discriminatory policies and acts. This article chronicles the labour and life of not only Bob Butt – who parlayed the purported immunity of his black body to seize privileges ranging from widespread mobility and notability to substantial wages and nearly his freedom – but also an enslaved hearse driver named John Jones and the scores of unnamed blacks pressured to work feverishly during the summer of 1855. These noteworthy episodes demonstrate that black labour – though not always black suffering, liberty or lives – mattered more than ever to distressed white officials managing ravaged and depopulated cities of mass illness and death. Over a century and a half later the convergence of a movement for black lives and the COVID-19 pandemic imparts even greater urgency to understanding the historical nexus of race, disease and essential labour.

Acclimation, employability and the myth of black invulnerability

Too often histories of urban epidemics have either neglected black fever workers altogether or reduced them to submissive and useful instruments of white needs and directives. Margaret Humphreys's 1992 classic *Yellow Fever and the South* focused on the disease as primarily a commercial problem that eventually compelled federal and state officials to implement public health reform in the economically underdeveloped postbellum South. Humphreys conceded 'the scant mention of blacks in this narrative', explaining that 'It reflects the inattention to the subject by the

southern medical literature on the disease.' Though the text acknowledged that commercial disruptions included 'the transportation of goods and passengers, and the cessation of ordinary local business during the three of four months' duration of the typical epidemic', the common fever labourers who conveyed and stowed away coffins rather than cargo – whether black or white, enslaved or free, native or immigrant – received scant treatment.⁸ In fact, medical literature and other contemporary sources do divulge enough shards of evidence to piece together the experiences of working people who spared diseased cities from descending into even greater chaos.

In his pioneering 1978 work *Medicine and Slavery: The Diseases and Health Care of Blacks in Antebellum Virginia*, historian Todd Savitt observed in a chapter on 'Epidemics' that white southerners 'noted racial differences in the malignancy of yellow fever and took advantage of them'. 'Blacks were already the major servant class in Virginia,' Savitt continued, explaining: 'during yellow fever outbreaks they became the exclusive performers of certain menial tasks deemed dangerous to whites. Suddenly hearse-drivers and grave-diggers were elevated to the status of celebrities because of circumstances. . . . Other blacks served as nurses alongside volunteer white women and physicians. . . . Whites discovered,' Savitt concluded, 'that racial differences in disease virulence sometimes saved their lives.'⁹ Despite Todd Savitt's several and significant contributions to the now flourishing field of medicine, race and slavery, a reinterpretation of epidemic labour is long overdue.¹⁰ Antebellum southern blacks – even the enslaved, and despite the severe restraints of pervasive white supremacy – were not simply the exploited objects of white masters, authorities and employers who tapped them for the most degrading, dangerous and dirty work amid epidemic fevers. In times of panic and plague, blacks too recognised opportunity and capitalised on their own supposed immunological superiority. They also were aware of the risks and at times chose to pass on profitable offers. No mere tools for saving fragile white bodies and lives, the enslaved cautiously navigated narrow and sometimes fictitious passageways of pestilential privilege and often hazarded trauma and death to command substantial wages, seize positions of authority, expand spatial mobility, upend racial hierarchies and make plays on freedom.

Mariola Espinosa has implored fellow historians to end the myth of inherent black immunity to yellow fever, persuasively arguing that people of West and Central African descent lack any innate racial resistance to the disease.¹¹ Conceding that many free and enslaved blacks – like native southern whites – acquired some protection through exposure, she cautions against perpetuating the historical and prejudicial fallacy that few blacks suffered or died from yellow fever.¹² Like Espinosa, Rana A. Hogarth traces the notion of innate black resistance to yellow fever in America to John Lining, a doctor who in 1748 witnessed an outbreak of the disease in Charleston, South Carolina.¹³ 'There is something very singular in the constitution of the Negroes,' the oft-quoted Lining wrote, 'which renders them not liable to this fever; for though many of these were as much exposed as the [white] nurses to the infection, yet I never knew one instance of this fever amongst them.'¹⁴ Benjamin Rush, an influential physician and signer of the Declaration of Independence, publicly disseminated Lining's racial misconception during Philadelphia's

1793 epidemic. As many whites fled, Rush urged the free black community to remain in the city to care for the sick and transport and bury the dead. The consequences for black health and lives were dire, inducing a *mea culpa* from Rush.¹⁵ But for many contemporary Americans, especially those seeking to justify racial enslavement, the die had been cast and the myth of black immunological invulnerability had been broadcast throughout much of the early republic. As Hogarth contends in *Medicalizing Blackness: Making Racial Difference in the Atlantic World, 1780–1840*, ‘white physicians deployed blackness as a medically significant marker of difference and used medical knowledge to improve plantation labour efficiency, safeguard colonial and civic interests, and enhance control over black bodies during the era of slavery’.¹⁶

Historian Urmi Engineer Willoughby’s study of *Yellow Fever, Race and Ecology in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans* embraces both Mariola Espinosa’s rejection of innate or genetic black immunity and Rana Hogarth’s linkage of racial ideology, medical practices and the plantation complex.¹⁷ Spotlighting the urban setting, Willoughby argues that ‘Ecological changes helped to determine the epidemiological history of New Orleans in the nineteenth century, and these changes in turn affected cultural attitudes about race, health, and the environment’.¹⁸ She details how locals doubled down on decades-old conventional wisdom that yellow fever was a ‘stranger’s disease’ after the infamous 1853 epidemic decimated the city’s substantial Irish and German immigrant communities and claimed over 8,600 victims.¹⁹ The calamity also impelled medical authorities to rethink and revise their doctrines of resistance to the disease, conjuring up black immunity to yellow fever amid plain evidence that – as in Benjamin Rush’s Philadelphia sixty summers earlier – many New Orleanians of colour had sickened, suffered and sometimes succumbed. As Willoughby points out, a few local doctors did occasionally acknowledge black anguish. But their post-epidemic writings placed far more emphasis on black survival, especially relative to the high mortality of immigrant and northern whites.²⁰ Since white masters prized black bodies for their property values and labour outputs – not to mention capacity to save white lives, a fact underscored during outbreaks – black immunity from death mattered. Immunity from suffering did not, especially if one was convinced that sick black bodies did not transfer the disease to others and could continue labouring for whites’ benefit.

In the immediate aftermath of the 1853 epidemic the now controversial but then highly influential physician and racial theorist Samuel Cartwright issued his prescription for yellow fever in the November edition of the *New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal*:

The best measures, in my humble opinion, to prevent its generation within the city . . . is simply to insulate the shipping with well acclimated negroes, and to let no other class of people act as stevedores, or to come within a specified distance of the wharf – precisely as small-pox is insulated by those who have had the disease in the natural way. Negroes are perfect non-conductors of yellow fever. Whereas, if there be anything contagious in that malady . . . to admit newly arrived emigrants to act as stevedores, or as draymen, to handle the packages before they are sufficiently aired,

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would be as dangerous and as cruel as to send ignorant persons with gunpowder in their pockets to handle hot ashes.²¹

Southern port cities from Norfolk and Charleston on the Atlantic to Mobile and Galveston on the Gulf of Mexico and New Orleans and Memphis on the Mississippi were vulnerable to the importation of yellow fever via commercial shipping. While municipal and medical professionals debated the competing merits of maritime quarantines and sanitation measures, some like Cartwright additionally advised who ought and ought not to be permitted to perform the labour tasks most exposed to the disease. Unloading and transporting 'tainted' import cargo. Nursing the infectious sick. Transporting the untouchable dead. Burying their rotting corpses. All such fever work was best left to 'acclimated negroes' who, unlike 'dangerous' white immigrants, could neither contract nor transmit the frightful and supposedly race-conscious disease.²²

Tracking the news from New Orleans and consuming Samuel Cartwright's counsel were officials like William Hume, a medical doctor, college professor and city alderman in Charleston, South Carolina, a city visited frequently by yellow fever. In March 1854, as the weather warmed and the next potential fever season neared, Hume echoed Cartwright in the pages of the *Charleston Medical Journal and Review*. When it came to perilous fever work, especially ferrying cargo to and from commercial vessels quarantined in the harbour, Hume recommended to his fellow physicians and policy makers, 'Great caution should be exercised in the selection of the transferring crews and labourers; negroes are decidedly to be preferred, and the unacclimated stranger should be positively prohibited from joining the party.' The presumed acclimation of black Charlestonians to yellow fever, Hume elucidated, shielded the entire city from the introduction and spread of the disease. Immigrants, on the other hand, 'would receive it in the vessel, bring it up, in apparent health, and in a few days be the means of counteracting all previous efforts, by its development and subsequent extension.'²³

Hume's warnings went unheeded, however, and Irishmen and other newcomers were hired to labour on Charleston's waterfront throughout the summer and fall of 1854. When frost finally killed the virus's *Aedes aegypti* mosquito vectors, ending the city's worst yellow fever epidemic to date, 256 Irish immigrants were among the 627 recorded victims. The official death toll included only fifteen black inhabitants.²⁴ The following year the city council belatedly began to regulate labour based on racialised perceptions of yellow fever susceptibility, mandating 'certificates of acclimation' for anyone employed conveying cargo between the waterfront wharves and harbour quarantine. Blackness erroneously served as sufficient verification of invulnerability in the eyes of most Charleston hirers. But the system was highly vulnerable to fraud and error, and some white immigrants continued to perform front-line fever work without the assumed immunological protections. Municipal authorities also required that only locally 'known' and 'acclimated negro draymen' should distribute throughout the city 'contaminated' cargo from quarantined vessels.²⁵ While enslaved and free black wage earners worked feverishly to leverage their purported immunity to yellow fever, 'febrile' Irishmen remained targets of

native and nativist white fear and anger. As one woman in Charleston wrote to a friend as the 1854 outbreak waned, the ‘besotted Irish’ were at fault for ‘keep[ing] the fever up by giving it constant fuel’.²⁶

‘Very little to fear’: caring for and transporting the dead

Irish immigrants were singled out yet again when yellow fever struck Portsmouth and Norfolk the following year. In early June 1855 the ship *Benjamin Franklin*, in need of repairs, steamed into Hampton Roads, Virginia. En route to New York from the West Indies, where yellow fever was endemic, the vessel and crew were quarantined for a week and a half before continuing up the Elizabeth River to Page and Allen’s shipyard in Gosport, just beyond downtown Portsmouth.²⁷ After local doctors concluded that a labourer employed aboard the *Benjamin Franklin* was the first official victim of the embryonic epidemic in early July, the vessel was returned to quarantine, the shipyard was shuttered and the Gosport district was fenced off from nearby Portsmouth.²⁸ But adjacent to Page and Allen’s were teeming tenements known as Irish Row, named for their immigrant occupants who worked at the nearby ship and navy yards. ‘The row of buildings in which all the first cases of fever occurred’, wrote Presbyterian minister George Armstrong, were ‘small, sadly out of repair, overcrowded with inhabitants, and filthy in the extreme’.²⁹ Within weeks the disease had extended across the Elizabeth River and begun sickening and killing inhabitants along Norfolk’s waterfront. Terrified residents who had not yet fled first constructed a twenty-four-foot wooden wall around that city’s crowded and sordid Irish tenements, Barry’s Row, and then burned the structures to the ground while firefighters and thousands of others looked on.³⁰ Norfolk’s *Southern Argus* conjectured, wishfully, that yellow fever ‘seems to have spent itself in Barry’s Row, and upon some of the hapless residents of those damp, filthy and unventilated tenements’.³¹ Armstrong similarly reported that all of Norfolk’s cases were ‘clearly traceable to the infected district’ around Barry’s Row, and that ‘the deaths have been almost altogether among our foreign population, where want of acclimation, intemperance, poverty, and filth, mark them out as the proper food for any such disease’.³² Condemning immigrants, building walls and razing their residences did not stop the spread of the disease, however, and by 16 August approximately 180 people in Gosport, Portsmouth and Norfolk were dead. The president of Portsmouth’s Common Council, Winchester Watts, wrote to his brother Samuel in Richmond on 19 August: ‘About 80 new cases yesterday. I cannot give you a list of the deaths. I believe we shall all die.’³³

But who did white Virginians like Watts include among ‘we’, and did ‘all’ really mean all residents of Portsmouth or Norfolk, cities with respective populations of about 10,000 and 16,000, including thousands of enslaved blacks? While visiting Portsmouth in mid-August George Armstrong noted that ‘The streets were literally deserted’, and that he encountered only one white person along the city’s main thoroughfare and two black cart drivers near the marketplace. He found a few additional ‘citizens of Portsmouth’ – presumably white – at the ferry house, including an undertaker who reported seven coffins ordered just that morning.³⁴ The following week

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the minister observed that ‘Norfolk has been rapidly assuming the same deserted appearance with her sister across the river,’ and estimated in late August that only one-third of the city’s roughly 9,000 white residents remained.³⁵ Having described Portsmouth and Norfolk as vacant and forlorn from white mobility and flight, however, Armstrong revealed these cities’ geographies of black containment and enslavement.³⁶

Of the coloured people but few have gone, partly on account of the difficulty of getting away, but more especially because the yellow fever is a disease from which they have, comparatively, very little to fear. In New Orleans and other southern cities, coloured people are pretty generally exempt from attacks of yellow fever. Up to this present time there have been some cases of fever among this class, in our city, and several deaths; but yet not so many as to form any very marked exception to the general rule established by the experience of cities south of us.³⁷

Armstrong – an educated clergyman, but not a physician – likely was not a subscriber to publications like the *New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal* or *Charleston Medical Journal and Review*, in which he might have encountered such racialised medical ideas. But while ministering to and caring for ill members of his congregation, and sometimes assisting with the removal and burial of the dead,³⁸ Armstrong and other locals engaged with doctors, druggists and nurses ‘from abroad’ who lent their experience in battling yellow fever in cities including Philadelphia, Washington, Charleston, Augusta, Savannah, Mobile and New Orleans.³⁹ Many of those volunteer medical professionals read and even knew race and disease theorists like Samuel Cartwright and William Hume, and freely promulgated or fortified the doctrine of black immunity among white leaders in Norfolk and Portsmouth who already wielded the power of racial injustice.

George Armstrong indeed was not the only area official and chronicler of the epidemic who transmitted his understanding of yellow fever’s supposed lack of colourblindness. N. C. Whitehead, a justice of the peace who served as acting mayor of Norfolk after yellow fever killed Mayor Hunter Woodis in late August 1855, conveyed to Charlestonian A. B. Williman and other volunteer physicians his awareness that ‘negroes’ were ‘a class less liable than the whites to the fever in its more fatal forms.’⁴⁰ Local physician J. D. Bryant concluded that ‘The coloured people resisted the epidemic influence better than the whites . . . The mortality among the whites at Portsmouth is stated to be 42 1/3 per cent., while that of the blacks was only 5 1/4 per cent.’ The doctor coldly tabulated that among the 2,200 whites remaining in Portsmouth amid the yellow fever, 2,100 suffered illness and 890 died. Among the 1,800 remaining black inhabitants, 1,700 sickened but only 95 expired.⁴¹ Dr J. H. Schoolfield, chair of Portsmouth’s Sanitary Committee, reported similar statistics to the head of the Philadelphia Relief Committee. Whereas 90 per cent of whites sickened and 35 per cent died, Schoolfield wrote to Thomas Webster Jr, ‘The blacks, for the first thirty days of the epidemic, did not seem to be liable to take it’

After that time, the cases among them became very frequent until probably two-thirds were attacked. But there was a marked difference in the mortality of the two races, the ratio of deaths among the Negroes being only from five to eight per cent. The mulattoes suffered more in proportion than the blacks, but not so much as the whites. The period of illness among our colored population rarely extended beyond three days, and there was very little treatment necessary.⁴²

From the prejudicial perspective of white Virginians like Armstrong, Whitehead, Bryant or Schoolfield, urban blacks had ‘very little to fear’ because they were ‘pretty generally exempt’ or at least ‘less liable’ to yellow fever. But when confronted with widespread black infirmity, white authorities desperate for black labour proclaimed black illness brief and black medical treatment nonessential. Obscured in the historical record through the violence of racial relativity were the agonising deaths of scores of black Virginians and the psychological and physical anguish of hundreds more forced into unsafe labour environments or to return to work prior to full recovery.

John Jones was one such worker. City streets otherwise devoid of human activity, Norfolk editor William S. Forrest recalled after the epidemic, were animated by ‘the hearses, and the ever-moving “sick-wagon” – rattling and rumbling to and fro in every direction, and with unwonted velocity.’⁴³ According to an update from Norfolk printed in Richmond’s *Daily Dispatch* in late August 1855,

Among those who have rendered themselves conspicuous for faithful services in these trying times, we have to notice John Jones, a mulatto slave, employed by Messrs. O Brien and Quick, who in his humble, but now highly important capacity of hearse driver, has by the unwearied and faithful performance of his really [laborious] duties, won for himself, the esteem and regard of the entire community. From the commencement of the disease, Jones has been actively employed night and day, in driving the ill-fated fever victims to the Cemetery. In many instances having to shoulder the coffins in which were the bodies of the dead, and place them in his hearse without any assistance whatever. All of the friends of the deceased having fled panic struck from the corpse.

The account went on to detail Jones’s many unsupervised hours aboard his ‘car of death’, puffing a cigar and ‘looking as cool and unconcerned as if he was driving a gay party to a festive picnic.’ Between mid-July and late August it was estimated that Jones had transported at least 500 bodies, and ‘with the prospects ahead, if he survives the epidemic, he bids fair to “charioteer” 500 more before the close of the awful drama!’⁴⁴ Unreported was the degree to which the Norfolk-born Dennis O’Brien and Benjamin Quick, cabinetmakers-turned-undertakers who retooled their business to meet the extraordinary demand for the production and transport of coffins, compelled the ‘faithful’ and ‘cheerful’ bondsman Jones to toil round the clock driving the ‘death-cart’ and hoisting weighty caskets.⁴⁵ That black labour was

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the linchpin of this essential enterprise of dead body disposal, however, was conspicuous to those still in Norfolk and Portsmouth. In a post-mortem 'sketch' of the epidemic, Dr Schoolfield reflected,

Even before the poor sufferer had breathed his last, his coffin was engaged, and other arrangements made for his speedy interment, and ere his limbs had assumed the rigidity of death, and within an hour or two after his dissolution, his body, without shroud or winding sheet, was placed in a common stained coffin, deposited in the hearse, under the sole charge of the negro driver, and hurried off to the cemetery, accompanied, save in a very few instances, by neither friend nor relative to see the last sad rites performed, ere he was shut out from their sight forever.⁴⁶

In late August a member of Portsmouth's Common Council, James G. Holladay, documented an extreme nursing shortage that left the indigent sick and dying in the solitary care of undertakers and the 'colored men' in their employ like John Jones who filled the coffins and drove the hearses.⁴⁷ But, despite white portrayals of Jones and fellow black hearse drivers as what historian Deirdre Cooper Owens terms 'superbodies' – physically superior black bodies imagined as unaffected by illness – William Forrest revealed in his 1856 account of *The Great Pestilence in Virginia* that '[Jones] had a severe attack [of fever] and survived' to resume the same wretched and risky work, whereas his white employers O'Brien and Quick 'both died of the fever'.⁴⁸ 'Literally the sick attend the sick,' lamented James Holladay, 'and almost literally, "the dead bury their dead."' ⁴⁹

As in 1793 Philadelphia, 1853 New Orleans and 1854 Charleston, the 1855 outbreak of yellow fever in Hampton Roads presented black inhabitants with a double-edged sword of high risk and potential reward. As thousands of white inhabitants exited the stricken Virginia cities, many coerced enslaved blacks to remain behind to superintend property or continue hiring out their labour for wages.⁵⁰ George Armstrong was convinced that 'of our white population who remained at home we all had the fever'.⁵¹ The minister also acknowledged the widespread and visceral fear among fellow whites who stayed put that there was great 'danger in nursing the sick or handling the dead', apparently assuming that 'acclimated' blacks lacked agency and readily would take up the slack.⁵² On 13 August Portsmouth's Winchester Watts wrote amid the scramble for nurses that 'the negroes are so much alarmed that it is almost impossible to get any aid from them for the sick. We have offered as much as ten dollars per night in one instance (Dr. Parker) but failed to get one'.⁵³ Norfolk authorities, facing similar resistance in their pursuit of caregivers and channelling Benjamin Rush, 'proposed to force the blacks who are able, but *unwilling*, to act as nurses for the sick'.⁵⁴

As the crisis escalated, so many elected officials in both Norfolk and Portsmouth either abandoned their posts or were incapacitated that newly formed charitable organisations – the Howard Association of Norfolk and the Portsmouth Relief Association – effectively took control of local governance. The responsibilities of these bodies included the solicitation and receipt of monetary donations from throughout

the nation and employing and paying labourers essential to combating the epidemic.⁵⁵ Evidence has yet to be unearthed explicating who owned John Jones, if and how O'Brien and Quick compensated him for his labour, and his fate after the Civil War and emancipation. But after undertakers O'Brien and Quick died Jones may have pocketed considerable wages transporting coffins for the Howard Association, which evidently earned him honorary membership in the all-white organisation.⁵⁶ The *Daily Dispatch* even announced that 'The people intend, by public subscription, to purchase the freedom of Jones,' an offer he reportedly declined because Virginia law required freedmen to leave the state along with any family and friends still in bondage.⁵⁷ Despite having survived the epidemic and attained regional renown, John Jones remained enslaved in a white supremacist society that quickly sought to snuff out black opportunity when the crisis ended. Also paradoxical is Jones's disappearance from the historical archive after the crisis, a re-silencing of his lived experiences and those of innumerable other enslaved fever workers. He did not appear in Norfolk's 1859, 1860 or 1866 city directories, and according to United States census records a free black man named John Jones did not reside in Norfolk or Portsmouth in 1860 or 1870.⁵⁸

'Duty beyond all price': burying the dead

Local chroniclers of the epidemic also captured scenes in the cities' bustling cemeteries. After hearses worked by black men dubiously deemed impervious to yellow fever 'were driven rapidly out to the grave-yards with two, three, and four at a load,' noted William Forrest, 'the coffined dead were piled up on the ground awaiting the opening of the graves and pits, by the insufficient force at work with the spade, the hoe, and the shovel.'⁵⁹ When minister George Armstrong accompanied a hearse to one of Norfolk's burial grounds, he discovered that 'so many graves have been ordered to-day, that, with all the help that can be hired to labour at grave-digging, it is impossible the orders should be promptly attended to. The hearse cannot wait; the carriages cannot wait; all we can do is to deposit the coffin where the grave is to be dug, and, offering a short prayer, there leave it, to take its turn at the hands of the over-tasked grave-diggers.'⁶⁰ The landscape Armstrong then described merits quoting at length. 'Before we quit the cemetery, stand here and look around you,' he began.

This is September – the season of the year when in ordinary times every thing looks green in this place, and under the shade of these old cedars a quiet reigns which well becomes a cemetery – a *resting place* for the dead. But now there are labourers toiling in every part of the ground, and the sound of the shovel of the grave-digger is heard on every side, even while our little company stood for a few moments uncovered for prayer. 'God's-acre' has the appearance of a ploughed field. Instead of a resting-place for the dead, the cemetery looks more like a camping-ground being got ready for a coming host of the living. The city and the cemetery have exchanged characters. The

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latter now wears the busy aspect which belongs of right to the former; and almost the silence of death reigns in the deserted streets.⁶¹

But who supervised and comprised this ‘insufficient force’ of ‘over-tasked’ and crucial gravediggers? In an 1857 report, Howard Association leaders defended the high cost of arranging for the burial of roughly 2,300 dead bodies in Norfolk. At the peak of panic in September, these interim authorities explained, ‘labor (and especially such as was demanded in the cemeteries) could not be procured except at very high rates.’ In support of this assertion the association pointed to \$500 in wages paid to twenty-five supplementary labourers earning twenty dollars each to dig graves for one week – considerable recompense for menacing but menial work that ordinarily garnered about one dollar daily. In all, the late President of the Howard Association, William B. Ferguson, dispensed \$1,939.00 ‘for digging graves’ in Norfolk, and \$5,868.25 more to pay undertakers.⁶²

Most white workers who had not retreated, sickened or expired were stamped ‘unacclimated’ and thus unhirable for the duration of the ‘strangers’ disease. The aforementioned A. B. Williman, an active member of the southern medical community and contributor to regional publications such as the *Charleston Medical Journal and Review*, served on a committee of six doctors reporting to municipal officials on ‘the Origin of the Yellow Fever in Norfolk during the Summer of 1855’. In a concluding statement Williman wrote, ‘If hazarding any advice in addition to that given in the report, it would be plainly this – *to remove all persons sick of yellow fever as far as possible from a crowded city population, and especially from that of the laboring Irish, who now abound in Norfolk* [original emphasis].’ Agreeing with outspoken pundits like fellow Charlestonian William Hume and New Orleans’ Samuel Cartwright, in other words, Williman insisted that unacclimated and highly susceptible white immigrants should be entirely isolated from the yellow fever dead and dying, presumably leaving the insalubrious work of nursing the sick or transporting and burying the dead to what Cartwright had termed ‘perfect non-conductors of yellow fever’ among Norfolk and Portsmouth’s black and captive population.⁶³ Given the prevalence of such racialised convictions, Howard Association officials doubtless exercised a predilection for twenty-five black labourers to quickly excavate earthen tombs for thousands of diseased corpses in Norfolk.

But it ought not to be surmised that black workers were merely passive and unthinking tools for safeguarding besieged white health and wealth. Whereas some refused as much as ten dollars to nurse infected white bodies for a single night, other black labourers risked torment and death to capitalise on urban employers’ desperation for their essential labour. Bob Butt, the enslaved and ‘noted grave digger’ of Portsmouth with whom this article opened, took near-maximal advantage of white authorities’ mistaken and racialised perceptions of his black body amid the epidemic. For his extraordinary onerous, insalubrious and indispensable work managing the burial of 1,159 yellow fever victims over seven weeks, the enslaved ‘Uncle’ Bob Butt could have been rewarded with accolades alone. In a lengthy report to charitable contributors published in 1856, however, the treasurer of the Portsmouth Relief Association accounted for a \$1,289.60 payment made on 28 November 1855

to 'Bob Butt, grave digger, balance allowed him, \$100 having been paid' on 31 August. Budget items elsewhere in the report suggest a total outlay of \$1,454.60 for 'Digging Graves' in Portsmouth, 95.5 per cent of which evidently was paid directly to Butt. In justifying this substantial expense, the association singled out the enslaved undertaker in a statement that Butt himself reproduced in his 1859 monetary appeal to Philadelphians as evidence for how his 'humble but arduous duties were regarded by his own people' in Portsmouth:

And then we had to make provision for the burial of the dead. In this last sad duty the Association was materially assisted by the indefatigable and truly praiseworthy exertions of one of our colored population, familiarly known as *Bob Butt*. This humble negro, in his line, performed duty beyond all price. From morn till night he labored at his spade, and frequently made the grave-yard his resting-place. Under *his* direction and superintendence, *all* who died of the Fever were decently committed to their mother Earth.⁶⁴

Unclear is the means by which Butt was paid. His owner, James Brittain, whom one might expect to have received and plundered his human property's wages, is neither mentioned in the narrative report nor listed as the initial recipient of the funds. Also uncertain is how much, if any, of this substantial sum Butt then paid to those who toiled under his supervision. What is known is that Bob Butt's black body, like John Jones's, endured the onslaught of the epidemic. Despite prolonged exposure to the same diseased corpses and gruelling labour, white counterparts such as undertakers O'Brien and Quick and Norfolk's 'principal grave-digger' Mr Dobs died, while Jones and Butt lived to reap benefits big and small.⁶⁵ Relieved, at least temporarily, from the incessant and restrictive gaze of white townspeople, Jones freely drove his hearse to and from Norfolk's cemeteries, earning pay, admiration and sympathy unfamiliar to his pre-epidemic existence. Butt grasped even more sovereignty over his own labour and life, directing a work gang of nine or ten men, earning a wage windfall and endeavouring an escape from servitude.

Which brings us back to Bob Butt's 1859 trip 'by permission of his master' to Philadelphia. Portsmouth's *Weekly Transcript* assured its white readers that though their city's enslaved hero was 'highly pleased with his jaunt' in the North and 'grateful for the sympathies of the people and the many kindnesses that were extended to him, he was glad to get back to his old home in Portsmouth'. The journey to Philadelphia had been no pleasure tour, however. The purpose of the black gravedigger's northern 'jaunt' was to return the disinterred remains of volunteer doctors and nurses to the City of Brotherly Love, virulent bodies that Butt likely laid to rest in 1855 and then dug up and prepared for long-distance transport over three years later. Only 'acclimated' black bodies like Bob Butt's or those of his 1855 burial crew were adjudged safe for such peculiar and perilous labour. And such a valuable body could not be lost to northern abolitionists. Notwithstanding the public gratitude, wage income, supervisory authority and geographic mobility, Butt's already narrow pathway to freedom was closed altogether when

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Philadelphians and white Virginians failed to raise the cash necessary to liberate the gravedigger or his family. The ‘colored hero of Portsmouth’ returned to the Old Dominion, where – along with John Jones and hundreds of thousands of other blacks – he remained in bondage perhaps until the end of the Civil War over six years later.⁶⁶

Conclusion: bridging the past and present

The protracted COVID-19 pandemic and the sustained global focus on threats to black bodies and lives following the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd in 2020 accentuate the timeliness and significance of this study and its broader project titled ‘Working Feverishly’. Crises starkly foreground – and furnish opportunities to challenge – societal norms, relations and disparities. Laid bare at present is a long United States national history of racial and socioeconomic divergence between those possessing the liberty and means to take shelter or flight from infection and those compelled to remain exposed and exploitable. Do the lives of front-line and ‘essential’ workers matter? Or, amid our current public health crisis, is the value of human life, and especially people of colour, again being reduced to their labour and what they can be coerced to contribute to economic reopening and recovery?⁶⁷ If the answer to the latter question is ‘yes’, citizens of a purportedly free and just (but also capitalist) society ought to admit that the workers labelled as ‘heroes’ are actually expendable. Just as we scrutinise the masters, employers, government officials and medical authorities who obliged Bob Butt, John Jones and countless other enslaved human beings to risk their health and lives transporting and burying the dead in antebellum Virginia, future generations will judge the narrow options presented today to nurses, transportation and delivery drivers, grocers, custodians and housekeepers, meat packers and prison workers in hard-hit New York City, Houston, Texas, Gallup, New Mexico, Marion, Ohio or Sioux City, Iowa.

By interrogating what history reveals about both the perils and promises of crisis labour, this article illuminates the extent to which people working feverishly – literally and figuratively – are able to maintain power over their own labour, well-being and lives. Like Butt and Jones, some front-line and essential workers may be rewarded with new benefits and opportunities, however limited and ephemeral. But many more are being sacrificed as the collateral damage of Americans’ demands for ‘freedom’ and the rush to restore prosperity. During pandemics past and present, local, state and national governments have sought to exercise dominion over both the living and the dead, often perpetuating deep-rooted linkages between risk and race. Just as this article has asked who owned and endeavoured to control black bodies and the fruits of their crisis labour in 1855 Virginia, one might inquire who holds sovereignty over the labour and lives of ‘essential workers’ caring for both the living and the dead in present-day Los Angeles, Miami or Chicago.

From Detroit, Michigan, to Albany, Georgia, and from New York City to Mexico City, morgue attendants and burial crews – a great many of whom are black and brown – have been overwhelmed by the bodies of fellow black and brown working people whom authorities had deemed essential in life but then quickly discarded

and forgot in death.⁶⁸ But other appraisals and assumptions are at play in this nexus of disease, labour and race as well. Studies show that white medical providers mistakenly presuppose higher pain tolerance – and therefore lower need for treatment – among their patients of colour.⁶⁹ Proponents of slavery propagated the racist myth that black bodies could naturally and best withstand the inhumane conditions of plantation labour, just as many Americans today perhaps believe Latinx workers are ideal for toiling long hours to harvest the nation's produce. Whom has society deemed the model COVID crusader? As with enslaved and free black workers in the urban Old South, those wielding the power of government, public health and employment today will determine who is immunologically best suited to withstand the onslaught and care for the bodies of the sick, dying and deceased. Who can and cannot leverage supposed immunity?⁷⁰

Pundits, lawmakers and scholars have begun to debate the efficacy and merits of 'immunity passports' – an official system of certifying those who have contracted and survived COVID-19, acquired protective antibodies and thus achieved the ability to safely work, travel and tend to the ill and departed as the pandemic still rages. *Reuters* reported in early July 2020 that, despite alerts from the World Health Organization that coronavirus antibodies may not persist, 'Estonia has started to test one of the world's first digital immunity passports, with countries including Chile, Germany, Britain and the United States also said to be exploring the option.'⁷¹ As historian Kathryn Olivarius warned in an April 2020 *New York Times* op-ed, the idea that 'viral immunity could be mobilized for economic benefit' has a long and dangerous history. According to Olivarius,

While some version of this strategy seems possible, perhaps even likely, we should not allow an official stamp of immunity to COVID-19, or personal willingness to risk the disease, to become a prerequisite for employment. Nor should immunity be used to double down on our pre-existing social inequalities. There is already racial and geographic inequality in exposure to and testing for this virus. The most vulnerable people in our society cannot be punished twice over: first by their circumstances and then by the disease. We have been here before and we do not want to go back.⁷²

Olivarius's research focuses on antebellum New Orleans, where white middle-class newcomers harnessed what she terms 'immunocapital' to access the full benefits of American citizenship. 'Deep Southerners discussed yellow fever obsessively,' she explains, 'worked according to its seasonal schedule, and judged others based on their perceived vulnerability to the disease.' Enslavers and their defenders pointed to blacks' alleged natural resistance to yellow fever as 'the region's chief argument for permanent racial slavery' and the near exclusive use of black enslaved labour to cultivate cash crops like sugar and cotton.⁷³ 'When a raging virus collided with the forces of capitalism,' Olivarius reflected in the *New York Times*, 'immunological discrimination became just one more form of bias in a region already premised on racial, ethnic, gender and financial inequality.'⁷⁴

Public-facing scholars and journalists also have reported throughout 2020 on an epidemic of prejudice and hate speech directed at Asians and Asian Americans in

the United States. A *Los Angeles Times* headline in early July read, “You started the corona!” As anti-Asian hate incidents explode, climbing past 800, activists push for aid.⁷⁵ President Donald Trump repeatedly referred to COVID-19 as the ‘kung flu’, a racist and misleading reference to the virus’s origins in mainland China.⁷⁶ When not scapegoating people of Asian descent, Trump and his ilk returned to his presidency’s white nationalist roots by inculcating migrant farm workers, many of whom are undocumented Mexicans, for spreading COVID-19.⁷⁷ On 18 June, *USA Today* reported that Trump administration officials in the Department of Health and Human Services, including Secretary Alex Azar, had repeatedly asked the Department of Homeland Security ‘whether Latinos are to blame for regional spikes in new coronavirus cases, asking in internal communications if Mexicans could be carrying the disease across the border, fueling domestic outbreaks.’⁷⁸ Such racially and ethnically targeted inquiries were nothing new in the Trump era, of course. In October and November 2018, administration officials and Trump-allied media alleged that a ‘migrant caravan’ of Mexicans and Central Americans would flood the United States with not only murderers, rapists and drug dealers, but also infectious and deadly diseases including smallpox, tuberculosis and even leprosy.⁷⁹ Though no evidence materialised in support of such blatant xenophobia and fearmongering, history reminds us that reality can be obscured by long-held popular perceptions, even if demonstrably false.

Notes

- 1 J. W. Blassingame (ed.), *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1977), pp. 112–13.
- 2 *Daily Progress* (Newbern, North Carolina), 1 February 1859, newspapers.com (accessed 27 June 2017).
- 3 1870 United States Census; 1880 United States Census.
- 4 *Daily Dispatch* (Richmond, Virginia), 29 September 1855, chroniclingamerica.loc.gov (accessed 27 June 2017); see also W. S. Forrest, *The Great Pestilence in Virginia; Being an Historical Account of the Origin, General Character, and Ravages of the Yellow Fever in Norfolk and Portsmouth in 1855; Together with Sketches of Some of the Victims, Incidents of the Scourge, Etc.* (New York, Derby and Jackson, 1856), p. 163. Nearly a month after reporting the ‘good omen’ of Butt’s presence in the city, the *Dispatch* informed readers that ‘Bob Butt, the grave digger of Portsmouth, stated that on Friday he buried five, and has orders for four graves on Saturday’, *Daily Dispatch*, 24 October 1855, chroniclingamerica.loc.gov (accessed 15 August 2020).
- 5 Blassingame (ed.), *Slave Testimony*, p. 113.
- 6 ‘Yellow Fever in Norfolk and Portsmouth’, *Charleston Medical Journal and Review*, 10 (November 1855), 888–9.
- 7 J. D. Bryant, *The Epidemic of Yellow Fever in Norfolk and Portsmouth, Virginia, during the Summer and Fall of 1855* (Philadelphia, T. K. and P. G. Collins, 1856), pp. 12–13.

- 8 M. Humphreys, *Yellow Fever and the South* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), pp. 1–2, 7; for exceptions, see *ibid.*, pp. 7, 23, 27.
- 9 T. L. Savitt, *Medicine and Slavery: The Diseases and Health Care of Blacks in Antebellum Virginia* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1978), pp. 242–3.
- 10 Aside from *Medicine and Slavery*, Savitt authored or co-edited the following: T. L. Savitt and J. H. Young (eds), *Disease and Distinctiveness in the American South* (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1988); R. L. Numbers and T. L. Savitt (eds), *Science and Medicine in the Old South* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1989); and T. L. Savitt, *Race and Medicine in Nineteenth- and Early-Twentieth-Century America* (Kent, OH, Kent State University Press, 2007). In February 2018 the History Department at Rice University hosted a two-day symposium on ‘Medicine and Healing in the Age of Slavery’, during which many presenters and panel commenters credited Todd Savitt’s foundational work.
- 11 M. Espinosa, ‘The Question of Racial Immunity to Yellow Fever in History and Historiography’, *Social Science History*, 38:3–4 (2014), 437–53, at 437, 439, 441, 447–9. Scholars have debated the existence and extent of Black immunity to yellow fever for decades. See Espinosa, ‘Question of Racial Immunity’, 438–9, and U. E. Willoughby, *Yellow Fever, Race and Ecology in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2017), p. 191 n29.
- 12 Espinosa, ‘Question of Racial Immunity’, 440, 442–3, 448. Espinosa acknowledges that the belief in inherent Black resistance or immunity to yellow fever ‘is old and historically important’, despite an absence of consensus on the matter among eighteenth- and nineteenth-century physicians and theorists. *Ibid.*, 449, 439–40.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 441; Rana A. Hogarth, *Medicalizing Blackness: Making Racial Difference in the Atlantic World, 1780–1840* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2017), pp. 20–5.
- 14 J. Lining, *A Description of the American Yellow Fever, Which Prevailed at Charleston, in South Carolina, in the Year 1748* (Philadelphia, Printed for Thomas Dobson, 1799), p. 7; Hogarth, *Medicalizing Blackness*, p. 21.
- 15 Espinosa, ‘Question of Racial Immunity’, 441–2; Hogarth, *Medicalizing Blackness*, pp. 20, 25–34.
- 16 Hogarth, *Medicalizing Blackness*, back cover.
- 17 Willoughby, *Yellow Fever, Race and Ecology*, pp. 77–8, 73.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- 19 *Ibid.*, pp. 51, 53, 60–1, 74, 80, 84–7.
- 20 *Ibid.*, pp. 63–94.
- 21 S. A. Cartwright, ‘Prevention of Yellow Fever’, *New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal*, 10 (November 1853), 316. For an outstanding historical reframing of Cartwright, see C. D. E. Willoughby, ‘Running Away from Drapetomania: Samuel A. Cartwright, Medicine, and Race in the Antebellum South’, *Journal of Southern History*, 84:3 (2018), 579–614.
- 22 Cartwright, ‘Prevention of Yellow Fever’, 316.
- 23 W. Hume, ‘Report to the City Council of Charleston on a Resolution of Inquiry Relative to “the Sources and Origin of Yellow Fever, as It Has Occasionally Prevailed in Charleston, and the Means of Prevention or Exclusion, as May Seem

- Worthy of Adoption, in Order to Obviate Its Future Occurrence”, *Charleston Medical Journal and Review*, 9 (March 1854), 164. For a comprehensive examination of labour, race and yellow fever on Charleston’s antebellum waterfront, see M. D. Thompson, *Working on the Dock of the Bay: Labor and Enterprise in an Antebellum Southern Port* (Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 2015), pp. 126–59, and M. D. Thompson, “‘The Unacclimated Stranger Should Be Positively Prohibited from Joining the Party’: The Impact of Yellow Fever Epidemics upon Irish and Black Labor Competition on Charleston’s Antebellum Waterfront”, in David T. Gleeson (ed.), *The Irish in the Atlantic World* (Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 2010), pp. 275–306.
- 24 Thompson, *Working on the Dock of the Bay*, p. 146; ‘Editorial and Miscellaneous: Yellow Fever’, *Charleston Medical Journal and Review*, 9 (1854), 851; J. L. Dawson, ‘Statistics Relative to the Epidemic Yellow Fever of 1854, in the City of Charleston’, *Charleston Medical Journal and Review*, 10 (1855), 200.
 - 25 Thompson, *Working on the Dock of the Bay*, pp. 152–5.
 - 26 Mrs Porcher to Mrs Allston, 16 October 1854, Allston Family Papers, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina.
 - 27 G. D. Armstrong, *The Summer of Pestilence: A History of Ravages of the Yellow Fever in Norfolk, Virginia, A.D. 1855* (Philadelphia, J. B. Lippincott and Co., 1856), p. 17.
 - 28 *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 20.
 - 29 *Ibid.*, p. 19.
 - 30 *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17, 20, 45–7.
 - 31 *Southern Argus* (Norfolk, Virginia) quoted in *Daily Dispatch*, 4 August 1855, chroniclingamerica.loc.gov (accessed 15 August 2020).
 - 32 Armstrong, *Summer of Pestilence*, p. 32; also *ibid.*, p. 58.
 - 33 Winchester Watts to Samuel Watts, 19 August 1855, www.usgwarchives.net/va/yellow-fever/barronletters.html#watts, accessed 15 August 2020; for an excellent overview of the 1855 yellow fever epidemic in Norfolk and Portsmouth, see L. Wagner, ‘The Fever’, *The Virginian-Pilot*, 10–23 July 2005, www.pilotonline.com/projects/collection_c0657a3c-a5c7-11e6-82ad-bf83a7517e05.html (accessed 10 July 2017).
 - 34 Armstrong, *Summer of Pestilence*, pp. 34–7.
 - 35 *Ibid.*, pp. 37, 54–5. Armstrong later revised his estimate of whites who remained in Norfolk upward to 5,000, of whom he believed 2,000 had died: *ibid.*, p. 145.
 - 36 See Chapter 1, ‘A Geography of Containment: The Bondage of Space and Time’, in S. M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2004), pp. 12–34.
 - 37 Armstrong, *Summer of Pestilence*, p. 55. Reflecting on the epidemic in December 1855, Armstrong noted his agreement with William Fergusson, a prominent Scottish physician who contended, based on extensive experiences in the West Indies, that ‘the blacks, as we have seen, never had and cannot take the disease’, which was ‘restricted to the European races’. Armstrong, *Summer of Pestilence*, pp. 176–8.

- 38 See, for instance, Armstrong, *Summer of Pestilence*, pp. 56–7, 67–8, 93–5, 111, 121–2, 128, and 143–4.
- 39 *Ibid.*, pp. 51–3, 71, 77–80, 84, 108, 139; ‘Report of the Philadelphia Relief Committee, Appointed to Collect Funds for the Sufferers by Yellow Fever at Norfolk and Portsmouth, Va., 1855’ (Philadelphia, Inquirer Printing Office, 1856), 13–14.
- 40 Armstrong, *Summer of Pestilence*, pp. 69–70; Forrest, *Great Pestilence*, p. 77; ‘Report of the Philadelphia Relief Committee’, 112.
- 41 Bryant, *Epidemic of Yellow Fever*, pp. 9, 13, 32–5.
- 42 ‘Report of the Philadelphia Relief Committee’, 114.
- 43 Forrest, *Great Pestilence*, pp. 87–8, 95, 138; ‘Report of the Howard Association of Norfolk, Va., To All Contributors Who Gave Their Valuable Aid in Behalf of the Sufferers from Epidemic Yellow Fever during the Summer of 1855’ (Philadelphia, Inquirer Printing Office, 1857), 102; Armstrong, *Summer of Pestilence*, pp. 88–9, 98–9.
- 44 *Daily Dispatch*, 30 August 1855, chroniclingamerica.loc.gov (accessed 15 August 2020).
- 45 *Ibid.*; Forrest, *Great Pestilence*, p. 95. White cabinetmakers Bennet Quick and D. O’Brien appeared in the 1850 US census and Norfolk’s 1851–52 city directory, respectively: 1850 United States Census; William S. Forrest, *The Norfolk Directory for 1851–1852: . . . Also, Information Relative to Portsmouth: With a Variety of Other Useful, Statistical and Miscellaneous Information* (Norfolk, 1851), p. 70. See note 48 for additional details about O’Brien and Quick.
- 46 ‘Report of the Portsmouth Relief Association to the Contributors of the Fund for the Relief of Portsmouth, Virginia, during the Prevalence of the Yellow Fever in that Town in 1855’ (Richmond, H. K. Ellyson’s Steam Power Presses, 1856), 139.
- 47 ‘Report of the Philadelphia Relief Committee’, 88.
- 48 See Chapter 5, ‘Historical Black Superbodies and the Medical Gaze’, in D. Cooper Owens, *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology* (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2017), pp. 108–21; Forrest, *Great Pestilence*, pp. 272–3. For reports of O’Brien’s and Quick’s illnesses and deaths, see *Daily Dispatch*, 30 August 1855, 4 September 1855, 24 September 1855 and 25 September 1855, chroniclingamerica.loc.gov (accessed 15 August 2020). The *Daily Dispatch* announced on 24 September that ‘B. Quick of the late firm of O’Brien and Quick, is dead’. The next day the paper further noted, ‘Benjamin Quick of the firm O’Brien & Quick, extensive and enterprising furniture dealers, is also dead’, adding with some irony, ‘His wife, a daughter of S. Butt, an estimable citizen, was buried last Sunday’. See also the general index, church registers and registers of death at www.usgwarchives.net/va/yellow-fever/yftoc.html (accessed 15 August 2020).
- 49 ‘Report of the Philadelphia Relief Committee’, 88. Cabinetmaker, furniture dealer, and undertaker Lewis Salusbury hired black labourers as well, at least two of whom died under his employ in August 1855. Forrest, *Norfolk Directory for 1851–1852*, pp. 3, 74; W. E. Ferslew, *Vickery’s Directory for the City of Norfolk, To Which Is Added a Business Directory for 1859* (Norfolk, Vickery and Company, 1859), pp. 22–4, 111, 126, 143, 147, 150, 152, 156; E. M. Coffield, *Second Annual*

- Directory for the City of Norfolk, To Which Is Added a Business Directory for 1860* (Norfolk, J. R. Hathaway, 1860), pp. 99, 126, 129, 130, 136; *Daily Dispatch*, 8 August 1855, chroniclingamerica.loc.gov (accessed 15 August 2020); and Forrest, *Great Pestilence*, p. 273.
- 50 Armstrong, *Summer of Pestilence*, pp. 21–2, 33–40, 54–6; *Daily Dispatch*, 8 September 1855, chroniclingamerica.loc.gov (accessed 15 August 2020).
- 51 Armstrong, *Summer of Pestilence*, pp. 179–80.
- 52 *Ibid.*, pp. 182–3, 189. Armstrong personally questioned this view.
- 53 Winchester Watts to Samuel Watts, 13 August 1855, www.usgwarchives.net/va/yellow-fever/barronletters.html#watts (accessed 15 August 2020); see also *Daily Dispatch*, 16 August 1855, chroniclingamerica.loc.gov (accessed 15 August 2020).
- 54 *Petersburg Express* (Petersburg, Virginia) reported in *Daily Dispatch*, 5 September 1855, chroniclingamerica.loc.gov (accessed 15 August 2020).
- 55 See ‘Report of the Howard Association’; ‘Report of the Portsmouth Relief Association’; and Armstrong, *Summer of Pestilence*, pp. 45, 107–8.
- 56 According to reporter Lon Wagner, ‘In early 1856, firemen led a solemn procession in tribute to the dead through Norfolk’s streets. The city’s orphans walked in the parade, escorted by the Howard Association and its honorary member, John Jones.’ Wagner, ‘The Fever’, 23 July 2005.
- 57 *Daily Dispatch*, 30 August 1855, chroniclingamerica.loc.gov (accessed 15 August 2020); Wagner, ‘The Fever’, 13 July 2005, 23 July 2005.
- 58 Ferslew, *Vickery’s Directory for the City of Norfolk*; Coffield, *Second Annual Directory for the City of Norfolk*; Webb and Fitzgerald, *Norfolk City and Business Directory, for 1866. To Which Is Added a Business Directory of Portsmouth* (Baltimore, Webb and Fitzgerald, 1866); 1860 United States Census; 1870 United States Census.
- 59 Forrest, *Great Pestilence*, p. 81. One correspondent noted, ‘Sometimes these shells of mortality, for the want of a sufficient number of grave diggers, are left rotting and stinking in the sun during the greater part of the day!’ *Daily Dispatch*, 5 September 1855, chroniclingamerica.loc.gov (accessed 15 August 2020).
- 60 Armstrong, *Summer of Pestilence*, pp. 98–9.
- 61 *Ibid.*, pp. 99–100.
- 62 ‘Report of the Howard Association’, 12, 41.
- 63 ‘Report on the Origin of the Yellow Fever in Norfolk during the Summer of 1855, Made to City Councils, By a Committee of Physicians’ (Richmond, Ritchie and Dunning, 1857), 44; see also A. B. Williman, ‘An Account of the Yellow Fever in Norfolk during the Summer of 1855’, *Charleston Medical Journal and Review*, 11 (January 1856), 162–71, 11 (May 1856), 331–43.
- 64 ‘Report of the Portsmouth Relief Association’, 19, 47, 67–8, 15; Blassingame (ed.), *Slave Testimony*, p. 113.
- 65 Armstrong, *Summer of Pestilence*, pp. 185–6.
- 66 Butt was listed in the 1870 US census as a fifty-five-year-old mulatto sexton with \$400 in real and \$350 in personal property; he resided with a sixty-year-old woman named Harriet N. Butt and a twenty-four-year-old named Madison

- Hargrove. In the 1880 census the sixty-six-year-old Butt was classified as black and resided with six others who shared his surname, Harriet Butt not being among them. Butt did not appear in the 1890 enumeration. 1870 United States Census; 1880 United States Census.
- 67 Thank you to Chris Willoughby for reviewing an abstract of this article and suggesting these ideas.
 - 68 K. Bracken and E. Rhyne, “‘Lord Have Mercy’: Inside One of New York’s Deadliest ZIP Codes’, *New York Times*, 22 May 2020, www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000007097093/coronavirus-st-johns-hospital-far-rockaway.html (accessed 15 October 2020).
 - 69 See, for instance, K. M. Hoffman et al., ‘Racial Bias in Pain Assessment and Treatment Recommendation, and False Beliefs about Biological Differences between Blacks and Whites’, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 113:16 (April 2016), 4296–301; S. Somashekhar, ‘The Disturbing Reason some African American Patients May Be Undertreated for Pain’, *Washington Post*, 4 April 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/news/to-your-health/wp/2016/04/04/do-blacks-feel-less-pain-than-whites-their-doctors-may-think-so/ (accessed 9 January 2017); A. Goodnough, ‘Finding Good Pain Treatment Is Hard. If You’re Not White, It’s Even Harder’, *New York Times*, 10 August 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/08/10/us/how-race-plays-a-role-in-patients-pain-treatment.html (accessed 9 January 2017); and Cooper Owens, *Medical Bondage*, pp. 123–6.
 - 70 I am grateful to my colleague Julia Cummiskey for reviewing an abstract of this article and sharpening many of these connections between past and present.
 - 71 R. Chandran, ‘Back to Work? Not without a Check-in App, Immunity Passport’, *Reuters*, 5 July 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-tech/back-to-work-not-without-a-check-in-app-immunity-passport-idUSKBN24701B> (accessed 12 July 2020).
 - 72 K. Olivarius, ‘The Dangerous History of Immunoprivilege’, *New York Times*, 12 April 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/04/12/opinion/coronavirus-immunity-passports.html (accessed 12 April 2020).
 - 73 Olivarius argues that enslaved blacks were denied access to ‘immunocapital’ in nineteenth-century New Orleans, a claim that this article has sought to complicate. K. Olivarius, ‘Necropolis: Yellow Fever, Immunity, and Capitalism in the Deep South, 1800–1860’ (Ph.D. diss., University of Oxford, 2016), p. i. See also K. Olivarius, ‘Immunity, Capital, and Power in Antebellum New Orleans’, *American Historical Review*, 124:2 (2019), 425–55.
 - 74 Olivarius, ‘Dangerous History of Immunoprivilege’.
 - 75 A. Do, “‘You started the corona!’ As Anti-Asian Hate Incidents Explode, Climbing Past 800, Activists Push for Aid’, *Los Angeles Times*, 5 July 2020, www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-07-05/anti-asian-hate-newsom-help (accessed 10 July 2020).
 - 76 See, for instance, K. Yam, ‘Trump Can’t Claim “Kung Flu” Doesn’t Affect Asian Americans in This Climate, Experts Say’, nbcnews.com, 22 June 2020,

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- 77 See, for example, M. Papenfuss, 'Florida Governor Ripped for Trying to Pin COVID-19 Spike on Hispanic Workers,' Huffpost.com, 20 June 2020, www.huffpost.com/entry/ron-desantis-hispanic-day-workers-covid-19-spike_n_5eed8a22c5b63562b7603ec0 (accessed 10 July 2020).
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- 79 J. Le Miere, 'Fox News Guest Claims Migrant Caravan Carries "Leprosy," Will "Infect Our People," Offers No Evidence,' newsweek.com, 29 October 2018, www.newsweek.com/fox-news-migrant-caravan-leprosy-1192605 (accessed 10 July 2020).