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## Cesar Lyndon Was Here: An Accounting of Black Living in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Newport

### A Summer Gathering

Cesar Lyndon is having a party. It’s actually a pig roast. He’s already made a list of invitees and bought the necessary food stuffs for it. There’s rum, sugar and limes for punch, green corn, wine, bread and butter, tea and coffee. And, of course, there is a pig. He doesn’t mention how big the pig is, but roast-worthy pigs can range in size from 20 pounds to 200 pounds or larger. When he notes an extra pint of rum for killing the pig—because it subdues the animal and sweetens its meat—he hints at the pig’s heft: a *pint* of rum suggests this is neither a small pig nor a small party. This is to be a good-sized gathering set for a summer’s day and maybe a corn harvest, just a week after a solar eclipse, on Tuesday, 12 August 1766.<sup>1</sup> And, it’s not too far out of town, about nine or so miles up the main road from Newport, Rhode Island, in Portsmouth. There are at least eight other people traveling those nine or so miles with Lyndon on this day: Boston Vose, Zingo Stevens and Phylis Lyndon, Neptune Sisson and his wife, Prince Thurston and his wife, and Sarah Searing and of course, Cesar Lyndon. Given the size of a roasting pig, they may be on their way to meet even more partygoers who will share in this feast. What takes them on a “pleasant ride out of town” is not clear; neither is how they travel with a pig in tow. But the story of this party isn’t just that it happens. It is what all nine of them—aside from this shared trip—have in common. They are all enslaved or living in various forms of “unfreedom” in Newport. All are friends, and some are lovers.

### Newport and Its Black Community

Cesar and Phylis Lyndon are enslaved to Josias Lyndon, a clerk and one-term colonial governor of Rhode Island. Famed bricklayer and stonemason John Stevens owns Zingo Stevens,

a well-known stonecutter and engraver of gravestones in his own right. Boston Vose is a sailor whose travels take him abroad to Surinam and elsewhere. Neither Sisson nor Thurston or their wives is listed among the free heads of households in time for Newport's 1774 census.<sup>2</sup> Their last names are shared by Newport's prominent slave-trading or slave-owning families; these families—Lyndon, Stevens, Sisson, Thurston, Wanton or Lopez—grow their wealth by selling and trading in men, women, and children on the coasts of West Africa, the Caribbean, South America, and in ports of call along the eastern seaboard, including Newport. These nine men and women are evidence of Newport's slave-trading cosmopolitanism. This coastal town is one of the first examples of religious tolerance in action and a hub of colonial American slave trading. By the time Lyndon writes of his pig roast, this colonial town with its deep harbor is a noteworthy epicenter of every part of slavery's business, from the makings of rum and ships to the sale and purchase of people.<sup>3</sup> Slave ships are plentiful in the town's harbor, and they bring to port all sorts of imported goods from the West Indies, Europe and Asia: tea, sugar, textiles, spices, and citrus fruits.<sup>4</sup> Because rum is the currency of the slave trade, Newport boasts at least twenty-two distilleries.<sup>5</sup> The town's slave markets dot the nearby wharves and Gravelly Point. Its enslaved (and sometimes freed) African residents make up about twenty percent of the town's population. One in five persons are African, and this population is exceeded only by colonial Charles Towne, South Carolina.<sup>6</sup>

Newport's enslaved women, men, and children are artisans, pastry chefs, stone masons, grocers and woodcutters, Christians, mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, and oftentimes, readers and writers too. Cesar Lyndon's crew of partygoers are no different. Neptune Sisson occasionally sells food at the market. Boston Vose returns from a Surinam with six China cups and saucers and a yellow framed mirror for Lyndon. Zingo Stevens carves wings and cherubs,

names, dates, and epitaphs into gravestones. Lyndon's friends are part of a larger community that worships together at First Congregational Church, Second Congregational Church and sometimes at First Baptist Church. Rev. Ezra Stiles, pastor of Second Congregational Church and seventh president of Yale, will lawfully marry Cesar and Sarah Searing and baptize Zingo's and Phylis' children. Lyndon and his friends are part of this cultural and economic landscape as women, men, and children who work to make a community of friends, fellow worshippers, and families while also helping to ensure the economic viability of Newport. They live near each other, work together, and are in this way part of the transactional business of slavery. As residents of this port town, they are part of an economy that renders them both commodities and consumers. But, on this day, Lyndon doesn't bother mention their enslavement or name to whom they belong; it doesn't seem to be particularly noteworthy.

While it's true the Rhode Island General Assembly might take issue with his beverage selection or even the number of enslaved persons that far from their respective homes, Lyndon spends quite a few pounds, shillings, and pence in this slaving economy for this barbecue. In total, he spends £ 33.13 on a rented room and on his local and imported goods; while pigs, bread, corn, and butter are available locally, there are no limes, wine, sugar, tea or coffee made or grown in Rhode Island. How Lyndon has access to these imports is not certain, and but that he does is curious because Newporters are battling the metropole over the imposition and repeal of various forms of taxation—namely, the Stamp Act of 1765 and Sugar Act of 1764. The town's ongoing conflicts with England's misuse of power encourage smuggling and riots in town. Despite the rippling effects of England's tax policy or Rhode Island's restrictions on the mobility or beverage purchases of enslaved persons, Lyndon chooses food and drink that are certain to make this party fun and delicious.

## Keeping Accounts, Ordering a Life

Lyndon records this story in numbers and words in his *Sundry Account Book*, housed at the Rhode Island Historical Society. Born on an uncertain date in a nameless location, Lyndon is a literate and enslaved record-keeper and mathematician. It's not clear how Lyndon learns to read, write, add or subtract; it's work that is similar to that of his master who, as a clerk and scrivener for the General Assembly, is literate and must also have legible penmanship. Cesar Lyndon knows how to add, subtract, multiply, and divide numbers—including those pounds, shillings, and pence of Rhode Island's currency as well as that of New York. Just a few years before the Revolutionary War, Lyndon's account book—as is customary, part-ledger and part-journal—collects in numbers the stories of Newport's enslaved and freed communities and its local slave traders. It's not a method of storytelling that a present-day reader knows to expect from an enslaved man. It's not a prose story about freedom or escape, like those well-anthologized nineteenth-century slave narratives by Frederick Douglass or Harriet Jacobs. It's both a literate and numerate text that does not aim to prove Lyndon's humanity or even admit to his education. Instead, Lyndon offers us—his readers—numbers and lists as a way to read his life and the lives of those with whom he transacts business.

From 1761 to 1771, he uses the methods of double-entry bookkeeping to track the sale of goods and services in long and short lists of stuff, people, numbers, and events. Debits are listed on the left, and credits are noted on the right. His hatch marks or X-marks may have denoted a completed transaction or may indicate that the transaction had been copied to a more formalized (though not presently extant) ledger.<sup>7</sup> His transactions are not always listed in chronological order, and he doesn't alphabetize his account holders. Lyndon's organization fits his genre. It's idiosyncratic and personal; it's supposed to make sense to him. It may hint at what's most

important to Lyndon and what's worth remembering. It gives us a glimpse into his ways of ordering his life, his accounting, and his business. He is a one-stop shop for Newport's enslaved community as well as its seafaring merchants.

Though it was never meant to be printed, Lyndon's account book glimpses the quotidian life of a man whose lists situate him and his literate and numerate reader in a greater community of traders, free and enslaved artisans and servants. Lyndon notes to whom he sells and from whom he receives all sorts of stuff: for example, pickled lobsters, sow pigs, leather breeches, ketchup (there's a lot of ketchup). His customers return often to partake of his goods; and with every return, he itemizes their debits, their remaining balances, and of course the trinkets, textiles, or pigs that are credited to their accounts. What Lyndon leaves behind—in about thirty-two, handwritten pages—is a catalogue of lists that invites us to wonder just who Cesar Lyndon is and what he has to teach us about early American accounting and living. Because Lyndon sells various items (from rum to silver buckles), he is always counting stuff. He creates pricing and numerical value for the slaughter and sale of pigs, beets, and textiles as well as those goods and services, exchanged or received. As items are purchased, he makes note of what he receives in return for his merchandise: cash, black stockings, pickles and pickled lobsters, a linen handkerchief, or silk. He seems to delight in fine looking glasses and indulge in silver buckles. And, when money is owed to him, Lyndon writes letters to request those balances due.

#### Traces of Networks and Narratives

Lyndon's account holders are notable slave traders, Jewish and Protestant merchants, enslaved servants and free persons in and around Newport who have come to him for various copying needs and food. For example, he lists two of Newport's most notable slave traders, Christopher Champlin and Aaron Lopez. Both men come to Lyndon for bushels of beets and

other sizeable quantities of food. Champlin, an Anglican churchgoer, is from a merchant family that made its money selling slaves and investing in slave trading voyages to the South Carolina and Georgia markets as well as to the West Indies.<sup>8</sup> Lopez is a Portuguese-Jewish trader and candlemaker who finances the building of Touro Synagogue as well as fourteen slaving voyages between 1761-1771; Lyndon's friend and partygoer, Zingo Stevens is among those enslaved persons who helps build the temple just a few years before their pig roast.<sup>9</sup> On 28 March 1766, Lyndon pays 25s to Venter Childs for "killing and dressing" a pig. Childs is married to Sabina and buries his baby daughter, Ann in the "colored" section of Newport's Common Burial Ground. On a Wednesday morning in May 1767, Lyndon lends £ 8 to Dinah's husband, Hammand Tanner—enslaved to James Tanner—who later the same morning "returned back" part of what he owes; later, Lyndon notes that Hammand pays more of his balance due.

Lyndon intersperses listings of local events with his financial business; he lists the arrival and departure of various persons as well as local marriages and deaths. Lyndon gathers these stories that leave us to wonder about their plot or even their end result. Lyndon makes note of his marriage to Sarah Searing, a little over a year after the pig roast, on the evening of October 6, 1767. In the weeks before their marriage, Lyndon remembers that he whitewashed Sarah's bedchamber and "painted the wood work blue." Searing and Lyndon are married just months after Zingo Stevens and Phylis: "Sunday about 2 o'clock afternoon July 20 1767 Mr. Zingo Stevens and Mr. Phylis Lyndon married by the Rev'd Mr. Edward Upham," pastor of First Baptist Church.<sup>10</sup> There's Phyllis Moffat's trip, on "Sunday Morning Nov. 8<sup>th</sup> 1767 from Mrs. Searings onboard of Capn. Ingraham for a passage to New London abt. ½ after 6 o'clock in of Morning." He doesn't say why she leaves or if she'll ever return, but her departure is worth remembering. There's the mention his wife's journey with her friend, Bess Thurston, to Bristol

on a Tuesday in July 1768. They leave in the afternoon on their hours-long trip, up the island and across a waterway—most likely by way of a ferry ride.

Lyndon also accounts for his grief. Amidst the colony's Stamp Act crisis and the subsequent Newport riots, Lyndon laments the death of his two-year old son, Pompey, who dies of the "bloody flux" on a Wednesday morning in September, 1765. (Lyndon's son shares a first name with an enslaved man who also lives in Josias Lyndon's household; the familial relationship is not clear. In 1783, the 27-year-old Pompey Lyndon is noted in the *Book of Negroes*; this census lists the names of 3,000 children, women, and men—many were formerly enslaved throughout the colonies—who choose to leave the United States after the Britain's defeat in Revolutionary War. Because they have chosen to pursue England's promise to provide freedom, land and economic opportunity to them, they board British ships with hopes to start a new life and head for various ports in Nova Scotia. Pompey Lyndon is part of this exodus and heads to Port Roseway, Nova Scotia.<sup>11</sup>) When Lyndon's son dies, he eulogizes his death in his account book: "Our little Darling Pompey was born y<sup>e</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Day of May 1763 taken ill in the night Thursday with the Bloody Flux Sep. 5 1765 and died Wednesday Morning abt. ¼ after 9 o'Clock being the 11<sup>th</sup> of said Sept. 1765." Lyndon says just enough to witness his grief. He does not share this page with anything else (it's not customary, in the mid-eighteenth century to waste paper in this way and Lyndon usually fills his pages). He doesn't use the rest of the paper write down a quick transaction or an arrival to port of an important person. It seems this page is meant to sit with his grief, and he underscores his note with a heavy weighted line of mourning. It's the only weighted line among the extant pages of text. Its insistence seems to hold space for the baby because, even his choice of syntax must mourn with him.

### Cesar Lyndon in View

Cesar Lyndon's *Sundry Account Book* cannot anticipate his declining health or the war that disrupts his selling of goods and the business of his slave-trading account holders. He lives and works for another thirty years—until about 1794. He lives through the Revolutionary War which nearly destroys Newport and certainly deadens its trade economy; the famed slave traders and ship captains—Champlin, Lopez, Wanton, Vernon, Godfrey—do not move their goods as well until after the new nation forms. Even after the war ends and trade returns, it's unclear whether Lyndon continues to keep an account book or to sell stuff as he once did. What I do know is that he doesn't make lists that hope for the freedom that he will one day receive (he will join Newport's Free African Union Society in the 1780s and serve as its clerk and accountant). Instead, his account book asks us to consider yet again what we understand to be the limits of the library and its special collections and also what we mean by literacy or even hidden. Lyndon's account book isn't hard to find. Lyndon doesn't have a hidden literacy. It is public throughout the 1760s and thereafter. Today, it's well-catalogued and well known at the Rhode Island Historical Society. Hidden is our word, and it describes how we understand what we don't know. Lyndon is here for us to see, to learn and ask new questions of those numbers and words that are part of his everyday life. Yet his stories are not those about which we write or even know. His literacy and numeracy are oddities to us because we've learned about how difficult, if not impossible, it was for enslaved women, men and children to receive an education. But it's true that Lyndon knows what he can do with letters and numbers too. What Lyndon's account book does is help us understand our assumptions and expectations as we navigate libraries and archives. It's us—scholars, present-day, readers and students—who expect Lyndon as an enslaved man to be illiterate and immobile or even unique. Lyndon's account book requires us to

look at our expectations and in particular, what we deem hidden or even how we imagine literacy. If we go learn his numbers and his double-entry bookkeeping we'll see what's hidden to us and find their communities of friends, lovers, and families who care for and tend to each other.

This essay would not have been possible without the generosity of many people, many libraries, and many institutions. Special thanks are owed to various persons, libraries, and institutions for their invaluable support: University of Delaware's 2019 Black Bibliographia Conference; JHU's 2019 Early Black Utopias Symposium and Black World Seminar; Keith Stokes, Theresa Guzman Stokes and the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society; CISA 2018-2019 Five College Fellowship Program; Dr. Tammy Owens; Dr. Deirdre Cooper-Owens; Dr. Mary F. Phillips; Dr. Natalie Leger; Dr. Kellie Carter Jackson; Dr. Elyssa Tardif, Dr. Suzanne McCormack, and the NEH 2015 Summer Institute at the Rhode Island Historical Society; History of Capitalism 2018 Summer Camp; Hampshire College's NEH Challenge Grant and Dean of Faculty Summer Grant; Dr. Paul Erickson and American Antiquarian Society's 2016-2017 NEH Long-Term Fellowship; Dr. Susan Brown and Dr. Kimberley Martin and University of Guelph's Digital THINC Lab Fellowship; Washington College's CV Starr Center for the American Experience, Dr. Adam Goodheart, Dr. Neil Safier and the 2018-2019 Hodson Trust-John Carter Brown Library Fellowship and; Dr. Erica Armstrong Dunbar and the Library Company of Philadelphia 2016 PAAH Short-Term fellowship and 2019-2020 PAAH Long-Term fellowship.

On Cesar Lyndon's account book, "Tara Bynum's Lists Letters and a Pig Roast: Cesar Lyndon's Sundry Account Book." *Early American Literature* 53.3 (2018): 839-849 and Jared Hardesty's "Rethinking Early Slave Literacy." *Black Perspectives* (21 January 2016). For a greater discussion of colonial Newport's black community, see Christy Clark-Pujara's *Dark Work: the Business of Slavery in Rhode Island*. (NYU Press, 2016); Edward E. Andrews' *Native Apostles*. (Harvard University Press, 2013); Akeia Benard's dissertation *The Free African American Cultural Landscape: Newport, RI, 1774-1826*. (University of Connecticut, 2008); Joanne Pope Melish's *New England Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1895*. (Cornell University Press, 199).

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<sup>1</sup> Joanne Pope Melish.

<sup>2</sup> Neptune Sisson's wife in 1765 may be Dinah Sisson. Prince Thurston's wife may be Bess Thurston whose name Lyndon mentions in a later entry in his account book.

<sup>3</sup> Andrews 189.

<sup>4</sup> Clark-Pujara 54.

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<sup>5</sup> Ray, “Newport’s Golden Age” 55. Clark-Pujara 62.

<sup>6</sup> Clark-Pujara 75. Andrews, *Native Apostles* 188.

<sup>7</sup> The RIHS does have a couple of pages that are copied and more formalized in the way of a ledger. There is no complete ledger book extant at present.

<sup>8</sup> Deutsch 234.

<sup>9</sup> Platt 601.

<sup>10</sup> Josias Lyndon, Phylis Lyndon’s master, attends First Baptist Church where Reverend Edward Upham pastors.

<sup>11</sup> See the *Book of Negroes*. Pompey Lyndon runs off in 1779 and leaves for Port Roseway, Nova Scotia in summer of 1783. In the 1774 census, Josias Lyndon’s household includes 4 unnamed blacks.

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