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## Canadian Slavery and the Extraordinary Diversity of Black Populations

While the Underground Railroad was a stunning achievement in collective resistance and allyship, it was also a mere fraction of the 200-year history of Canadian Slavery, the period when we were also the “bad guys”. Furthermore, what no one wishes to remember is that prior to 1834, enslaved people in Canada routinely ran southward, not in search of a free state, but simply to get as far away as possible from their Canadian enslavers.

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Canadians know next to nothing about our history of Transatlantic Slavery. This fact should not be surprising since our educational system – kindergarten to university – provides little to no opportunities to learn about this essential global history. Those of us who spent our school years in Canada know well what content gets delivered instead. As a write, a day away from Black History Month (African History Month), well-intentioned elementary and high school teachers across the nation are preparing content on the Underground Railroad. But in choosing to teach about a history spanning approximately 30 years (from the end of slavery in the British Empire in 1834 - meaning here at home too – to the end of the American Civil War in 1865), we have retroactively transformed ourselves into the anti-slavery heroes who saved enslaved African Americans from the deadly machine of plantation slavery in the American South.

While the Underground Railroad was a stunning achievement in collective resistance and allyship, it was also a mere fraction of the 200-year history of Canadian Slavery, the period when we were also the “bad guys”. Furthermore, what no one wishes to remember is that prior to 1834, enslaved people in Canada routinely ran southward, not in search of a free state, but simply to get as far away as possible from their Canadian enslavers. Therefore, when the white Montreal slave owner John Turner Senior printed a fugitive slave advertisement on 11 March 1784 in the Quebec Gazette to recapture “a Negro-Man, named ISHMAEL,” his ad included Ishmael’s previous residence as Claverac near Albany, New York. (Fig. 1) Clearly, Turner understood that Ishmael may have been fleeing southward to the US to reunite with the kin and community from whom he had been so callously separated.<sup>1</sup>

*Sign'd at Quebec, March 2d, 1784.* *44th Regiment.*

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**FOURTEEN DOLLARS REWARD:**

**R**UN-AWAY, on Sunday Night last, from the Subscriber, a Negro-Man, named ISHMAEL, about 36 Years of Age, and nearly 5 Feet 6 Inches high; of a remarkably down-cast Countenance, and a black and copper coloured mixt Complexion; his Hair is short, strong black and curly; and his Face much pitted with the small Pox. He wants some of his Upper-fore Teeth, as likewise the first Joint of the fourth Finger of his left Hand; and besides, on the middle of his Right-Leg, he has a fresh Eschar from a Horse Kick lately received and cured; had on when he went off, a round Hat cocked up behind and a blue silk Band; a red plush Waistcoat; a pair of blue Bath coating Leggings and Breeches in one; and a Pair of Shoes and Metal Buckles.

He came from Claverac near Albany in 1776, with his former Master, C. Spencer; can speak and read English tolerably well, and understands a little Dutch and French; he passes himself, 'tis said, as a Free Negro, the more easily to effect unnoticed his intended Escape out of the Province. Whoever will apprehend the said Negro-Man, and deliver him to the Subscriber, Merchant, Montreal, shall receive the above Reward, and all reasonable Charges, from

**JOHN TURNER.**

*Montreal, March 1, 1784.*

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**TEN POUNDS REWARD.**

Fig. 1

As a person who researches and teaches Transatlantic Slavery, I am all too aware of how its legacies continue to haunt us today. The institutionalized anti-black racism that mars our corporate, economic, healthcare, housing, policing, and political sectors (to name a few) did not spring fully formed from the ground in the twenty first century. Rather, this racism is simply a product of a centuries-long practice that has never been fully undone, redressed or atoned for. My new position as the Tier I Canada Research Chair in Transatlantic Black Diasporic Art and Community Engagement at NSCAD University in Halifax has placed me in the privileged position to build a research institute of my choosing. The Institute for the Study of Canadian Slavery is the first of its kind in Canada and the world.

The decision to build a research centre that focuses on these complex and difficult histories was an easy choice for me. Born and raised in Canada, it was the critical alternative education of my home (a loving place with two Jamaican-born parents), that allowed me to identify the gaps, omissions (and quite frankly), the lies which riddled my elementary and high school education. Now seven books and over 250 speaking engagements later - most of which have focused on some aspect of the art and visual culture that emerged from the 400-year history of Transatlantic Slavery - I am continually confronted by the pervasive Canadian ignorance of our participation in the "peculiar institution," as slavery was known.

Transatlantic Slavery was uniquely horrific. A race-based form of chattel slavery, it reduced human beings to chattel or moveable personal property, making them no different from everyday objects like a cart, desk, or bag of salt under colonial law. Deliberately organized in a matrilineal order, it incentivized rape and sexual coercion because any child born to an enslaved female (regardless of the race or social status of the father) immediately took on the status of the mother. While Indigenous people were sometimes enslaved, the only group that was always deemed to be "enslaveable" were black Africans.

Although many of us have watched American films about slavery (usually set in the deep south) like Gone with the Wind (1939), or more recently Django Unchained (2012) and 12 Years a Slave (2013), there are no comparable big or small screen, narrative or documentary films about Canadian Slavery. Instead, when Brad Pitt shows up as the carpenter named Bass at the end of 12 Years a Slave, it is as the white Canadian hero who gets word of Solomon Northup's (played by Chiwetel Ejiofor) abduction and unjust enslavement in the south to his family and friends back north. Bass, the "good Canadian," becomes Northup's ticket to freedom.

Our non-existent Canadian Slavery curriculum and lack of popular culture alternatives has also resulted in a pervasive ignorance about black Canadians. For starters, Canadian unfamiliarity with the fact that black people have been in Canada since the 1600's leads to the pervasive misidentification of black Canadians as recent immigrants. Meanwhile, although the term "black" is usefully deployed as a catchall to describe the various people of African descent who were historically enslaved in Canada, it also occludes the knowledge of the extraordinary diversity of this group. But the advertising that emerged from slavery – here and abroad – can help to redress this blindness.

Black populations in Canada during the period of slavery were extremely diverse. One source which sheds light on this heterogeneity is fugitive slave advertisements. Also known as runaway slave advertisements, these notices were placed by white Canadian slave owners in order to hunt and recapture the enslaved people who resisted through flight. As one might guess, the ads documented the enslaved in invasive detail, providing descriptions not only of names, but of height, body type, hair style and colour, racial types, complexion, clothing, and even mannerisms. But significantly, details of a person's location of birth, previous place of residence, accent, and languages were also routinely provided. This last group of identifiers were all things which worked to inform the ad's readers about where the enslaved fugitive had come from, and significantly, where they might have been headed.

Several cases from the province of Quebec highlight these practices. An enslaved man named Andrew was described in a fugitive notice from 1767 as "born in Maryland," while several years later in 1779, a "Negro Lad" named Nemo was listed by the Quebec City tailor Hugh Ritchie as having been born in Albany, New York.<sup>2</sup> (Figs. 2 & 3) Black people were also born into slavery Canada. Such appears to be the case with another of the people that Hugh Ritchie enslaved, the twenty-six year old Cash who was described as a "Negro Wench".<sup>3</sup> (Fig. 3) While Ritchie's ad did not explicitly state Cash's origins, his description of her linguistic abilities as "speaks English and French very fluently," indicates that she was likely born in Quebec where, unlike other Canadian provinces and various parts of the US, both languages were commonly spoken.

vendra à très bonne composition, pour de l'argent comptant, ou à court terme.



**R**UN-AWAY, from *James Crofton*,  
Vintner in Montreal, the Third of May, 1767, a Mulatto  
Negro Slave, named Andrew, born in Maryland, Twenty-three Years  
of Age, middle sized, very active and sprightly, has a remarkable  
large Mouth, thick Lips, his Fingers crooked, speaks good English  
and French, a little Dutch and Earse; is supposed to have with him  
forged Certificates of his Freedom, and Passes. Whoever takes up  
and secures the said Negro, so that his Master may have him again,  
shall have **EIGHT DOLLARS** Reward, besides all reasonable Charges, paid by Mr.  
**HENRY BOONZ**, Merchant, at Quebec, or **JAMES CROFTON**, at Montreal.

N. B. He is remarkable for being clean dress'd and wearing a Handkerchief tied round  
his Head; is very well known to all the Gentlemen at Quebec, that has been in Mon-  
treal, and who have used my House, and was Three Months with Mr. **JOSEPH HOWARD**,  
of Montreal Merchant, last Summer in Quebec.

**L'**en est fait le service de **JACQUES CROFTON**, Tavernier, à Montréal, le 3 de Mai,  
1767, Un Nègre Mulâtre Esclave, nommé **ANDRE**, né en Maryland, age de vingt  
trois ans, de la moyenne taille, fort vif et alerte, ayant la bouche extraordinairement  
grande, les lèvres grosses et les doigts crochés: Il parle bon Anglois et François, et un  
peu Hollandois et Ecoissois: L'on suppose qu'il porte avec lui de faux certificats de la fran-  
chise et de faux passeports. Toute personne qui l'arrêtera et qui le mettra en lieu de sûreté,  
de façon que son dit maître puisse l'avoir, recevra **HUIT PIASTRES** de récompense,  
outre tous fraix raisonnables, qui lui seront payés par Mr. **HENRY BOONZ**, Négociant, à  
Québec, ou par **JACQUES CROFTON**, à Montréal.

N. B. Il est remarquable pour se mettre proprement, et pour porter un mouchoir atâché  
autour de sa tête; il est bien connu par tous les Messieurs de Québec qui ont été à Montréal,  
et qui ont fréquenté ma maison; et il a resté à Québec pendant trois mois de l'Été dernier,  
avec Mr. **Joseph Howard**, Négociant de Montréal.

**A VENDRE à l'IMPRIMERIE.**

Fig. 2

and give their Attendance accordingly.  
MONTREAL, 30th October, 1779.

EDWD. WM. GRAY, Sheriff.

**R A N - A W A Y**

**F**ROM the Subscriber, on Sunday morning the 24th ult. about four o'Clock, a Negro Lad named *NEMO*, born in Albany, near eighteen years of age, about five feet high, full round fac'd, a little mark'd with the Small-pox, speaks English and French tolerably; he had on when he went away a double-breasted Jacket of strip'd flannel, old worsted Stockings, and a pair of English Shoes. Also a Negro Wench named *CASH*, twenty-six years old, about 5 feet 8 inches high, speaks English and French very fluently; she carried with her a considerable quantity of Linen and other valuable Effects not her own; and as she has also taken with her a large bundle of wearing apparel belonging to herself, consisting of a black latten Cloak, Cap, Bonnets, Ruffles, Ribbons, six or seven Petticoats, a pair of old Stays, and many other articles of value which cannot be ascertained, it is likely she may change her dress. All persons are hereby forewarned from harbouring or aiding them to escape; and Masters of vessels from carrying them off, as they may depend on being prosecuted to the utmost rigour of the Law; and whoever will give information where they are harboured, or bring them back to the Subscriber at Quebec, or to Mr. GEORGE ROSS, Merchant at Sorel, shall have **TEN DOLLARS** Reward for each, and all reasonable charges.

**HUGH RITCHIE.**

N. B. The Lad was seen at Sorel on Friday morning the 29th ult. and there is reason to believe they are both lurking thereabout.  
*Quebec, November 2, 1779.*

**RAN-AWAY** on Sunday the 24th of October. JOHN BARCLAY

Fig. 3

Enslaved black people were also forcibly shipped to Canada from the Caribbean (British and French controlled islands) by West Indian Merchants like James McGill of Montreal and Joshua Mauger of Halifax. (Figs. 4) Evidence of these Canadian-Caribbean trade routes appears in another fugitive notice posted in the *Quebec Gazette* in 1779 for the return of JNo. Thompson who was described by Simon Fraser as “a black Boy...born in Spanish-Town, Jamaica” who had escaped from the ship *Susannah*.<sup>4</sup> (Fig. 5) Although colonial trade was normally limited to traffic within each empire (meaning for Canada, from other British or French territories), these notices even hint at the presence of black people from outside of these colonies. Placed on 15 July 1768, Sarah Levy described a runaway “Mulatto Man named WILL,” as speaking “French, English and Spanish,” the last language, decidedly uncommon in the region.<sup>5</sup> (Fig. 6) Will then, had likely been born in a region where Spanish was spoken – like Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico or Mexico – or spent a significant period in the household of a slave owner who had spoken the language.


th, New-York, Law for Newfoundland.

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## Advertisements.

**JUST** imported, and to be sold by Joshua  
Mann, at Major Lockman's Store in Halifax *just* at Negro  
Slaves, viz. A very likely Negro Wench, of about thirty five Years of  
Age, a Creole born, has been brought up in a Gentleman's Family, and  
capable of doing all sorts of Work belonging thereto, as Needle Work of all  
sorts, and in the best Manner; also Washing, Ironing, Cookery, and e-  
very other Thing that can be expected from such a Slave: Also 2 Negro  
Boys of about 12 or 13 Years old, likely, healthy and well shap'd, and  
understand some English: Likewise 2 healthy Negro Slaves of about 18  
Years of Age, of agreeable Tempers, and fit for any kind of Business:  
And also a healthy Negro Man of about 30 Years of Age.

Fig. 4



**R**UNAWAY from the Ship *Sufannah*, Captain  
BALLANTINE, on Monday evening last, a black  
Boy named JNO. THOMPSON, height about 5 feet  
3 or 4 inches, born in Spanish-Town, Jamaica, had  
on when he went away a brown Waistcoat with a  
flannel wrapper and black knit Breeches, without any  
Stockings. Whoever brings the same Boy to Mr.  
SIMON FRASER's, or on board the same Ship, shall  
receive ONE GUINEA Reward. †

**DISTRICT of MONTREAL.**

Fig.5

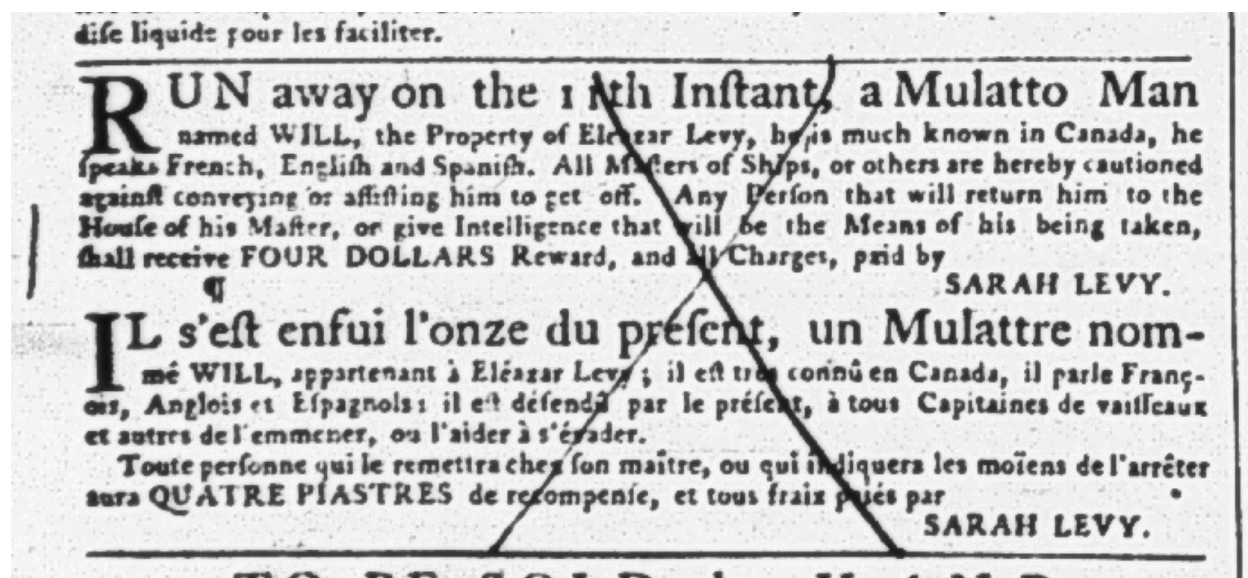


Fig. 6

But the smallest group of enslaved blacks in Canada was those born on the African continent. Unlike slave owners in tropical locales who routinely dealt with slave ship arrivals directly from the continent (and therefore African-born captives of various ethnicities), Canadian slave owners had little to no familiarity with African-born people. Slave ships did not arrive in Canada directly from Africa. Therefore, while slave notices from places like Jamaica routinely named the ethnicity of escaping African-born people in fugitive advertisements (ie. Congo, Coromantee etc.), Canadian notices used more generic terms like “African-born” or “Guinea accent”.<sup>6</sup> (Figs. 7 & 8)

Given this evidence, at a minimum, blackness in the period of Canadian Slavery meant: African Canadian, African American, African Caribbean (Anglo- and Franco-), and African-born people; a diversity that continues to grow today. This extraordinary diversity meant that black people would not have necessarily shared a common language, never mind spiritual, clothing, hair, food, music, or kinship practices. But forced into alliance by the brutality of slavery, they came to create common rituals, dialects, and cultures to survive. With the under-funded and neglected state of Canadian Slavery Studies, scholars have yet to explore any of these dimensions of Canadian slave life in depth.

each other in the public declarations of their loyalty.

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**A D V E R T I S E M E N T S.**



**R**ANAWAY from the Printing-office  
in QUEBEC, on Saturday evening the twenty-second instant, A Negro Lad named JOE, born in Africa, about twenty years of age, about five feet and an half high, full round fac'd, a little marked with the small-pox, speaks English and French tolerably; he had on when he went away an old green fur-cap, an old sky-blue broad-cloth coat, an old grey ratteen jacket, leather breeches, brown leggings and Canadian macassins. All persons are hereby forewarned from harbouring or aiding him to escape, as they may depend on being prosecuted to the utmost rigour of the Law, and whoever will give information where he is harboured, or bring him back, shall have **FOUR DOLLARS** Reward from  
**THE PRINTER.**

**I**L s'est évadé de l'Imprimerie à Québec; Samedi 22  
du courant au soir, un Garçon Negre nommé JOE, né en Afrique, âgé d'environ vingt ans, de la taille d'environ cinq pieds et demi, le visage rond et plein, un peu marqué de la petite vérole, il parle passablement Anglois et François; il portoit quand il s'est évadé un Casque vert, un vieux Habit de drap fin bleu-céleste, une vieille Veste de satin grise, des Culottes de cuir, des Mitasses vinées et des Souliers Sauvages. Il est défendu à toutes personnes de le retirer ou de l'aider à s'évader, vû qu'elles seront poursuivies selon toute la rigueur des Loix, et quiconque l'arrêtera et le ramènera, recevra **QUATRE PIASTRES** de récompense de  
**L'IMPRIMEUR.**

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**A L L** Persons indebted to the Estate of *William*


Fig. 7



DAVID LYND, C. peace.

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**A D V E R T I S E M E N T S.**



**R**UN AWAY on Saturday night the 10th Instant, a Negro man named JACK, about five feet eight inches high, had on when he went away a red coat faced with green, buff waistcoat and breeches, and an old blanket coat, speaks no other tongue but English, and that upon the Guinea accent, his foretop turned back, very black, with a large beard, was lately purchased of Captain Covells, of Colonel Peters Volunteers. Whoever will secure the said Negro, that his Master may get him again, shall have a Reward of **EIGHT DOLLARS** and all reasonable charges paid by **FINLAY & GREGORY**, merchants near the Market-place Montreal.

MONTREAL, May 13, 1778.

**I**L s'est enfui Samedi la nuit, 10 du présent, un Negre nommé JACK, d'environ cinq pieds huit pouces; lorsqu'il s'est enfui il avoit un habit rouge, parmenté de verd, une paire de culottes et une veste de buffle, et un vieil espot de couverte, il ne parle que langue Angloise, encore avec l'accent de la Guinée. Son toupet relevé, très noire avec beaucoup de barbe. Il a été dernièrement acheté du Capitaine Covells des volontaires du Colonel Peters. Quiconque ramenera le dit Negre à son maître, aura une récompense de **HUIT PIASTRES**, et il sera remboursé de tous ses frais raisonnables par **FINLAY & GREGORY**, marchands près la place du marché de Montréal.

Montréal, le 13 Mai, 1778.

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**P I E R C E R Y A N**

Fig. 8

Understanding the complex diversity of blackness in the period of Canadian Slavery is a defense against one of the most routine mechanisms of racial oppression, the stereotypical belief that all black people are the same. Recognizing the 200-year history of slavery in Canada presupposes an acknowledgement that enslaved and free black people have lived in Canada since the 1600's. By acknowledging Canadian Slavery, we move towards debunking the myth of the ideal Canadian citizen as only white and allow black Canadians to be more than perpetual immigrants.

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Fig. 1: John Turner, “FOURTEEN DOLLARS Reward,” Quebec Gazette, 11 March 1784, vol. 968, p. 3; Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (BANQ), Montreal, Canada.

Fig. 2: James Crofton, “RUN-AWAY, from *James Crofton*,” Quebec Gazette, 14 May 1767, vol. 124, p. 4; Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (BANQ), Montreal, Canada.

Fig. 3: Hugh Ritchie, “RAN-AWAY,” Quebec Gazette, 4 November 1779, vol. 740, p. 3; Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (BANQ), Montreal, Canada.

Fig. 4: Joshua Mauger, “Advertisements: Just Imported,” Halifax Gazette, Saturday, 30 May 1752, p. 2; PANS MFM #8151, Reel 8151, 23 March 1752 - 6 March 1766, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management, Halifax, Canada.

Fig. 5: Simon Fraser, “RUNAWAY from the ship *Susannah*,” Quebec Gazette, 30 September 1779, vol. 735, p. 3; Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (BANQ), Montreal, Canada.

Fig. 6: Sarah Levy, “RUN away on the 11<sup>th</sup> Instant,” Quebec Gazette, 15 July 1768, vol. 185, p. 3; Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (BANQ), Montreal, Canada.

Fig. 7: THE PRINTER (William Brown), “RANAWAY from the Printing-office,” Quebec Gazette, 27 November 1777, vol. 639, p. 3; Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (BANQ), Montreal, Canada.

Fig. 8: Finlay and Gregory, “RAN AWAY on Saturday night,” Quebec Gazette, 21 May 1778, vol. 664, p. 3; Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (BANQ), Montreal, Canada.

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Mackey, “Appendix I: Newspaper Notices,” Done with Slavery: The Black Fact in Montreal (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s Press, 2010), p. 326.

<sup>2</sup> “Appendix I: Newspaper Notices,” pp. 315, 323.

<sup>3</sup> Mackey, “Appendix I: Newspaper Notices,” p. 323.

<sup>4</sup> Mackey, “Appendix I: Newspaper Notices,” p. 322.

<sup>5</sup> Mackey, “Appendix I: Newspaper Notices,” p. 315.

<sup>6</sup> Mackey, “Appendix I: Newspaper Notices,” p. 320.