

**Of Segregation, Surveillance and Suppression:  
The Power of the Press in 18th Century Canada**

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The media holds an irrefutable grip on Canadian society. In fact, the power of the press is a hand which extends into the minds and communities of Canadians abroad. In the nation's earliest days, a famed alias column in an 18th century gazette possessed similar strength to that of a 21st century trending tweet - both dictating the politics and prejudice of the audience which blindly consumes it. In pre-Confederation Canada, the press operated to perpetuate racial stereotypes and establish societal norms that vindicated the suppression of African Canadian peoples. This manipulation played a crucial role in Canada's participation in the transatlantic slave trade. Although Canadian society is lauded for its triumph in the Underground Railroad,<sup>1</sup> the media of the past disrupts this facade, and discloses the true colonial nature of the country. A collection of primary sources documented in the *Nova Scotia Archives* reveals a racial bias which mobilized the press to be a tool of oppression against Black slaves in pre-Confederation Canadian society. These documents exhibit a strong interplay of white supremacy and hegemonic domination, which normalized a social acceptance of slavery among its free, white populace. Examining print culture in 18th century Canada exposes the racist tones of the press. Published advertisements encouraging both the sale of slaves and apprehension of fugitive runaways demonstrates the promotion of slavery and intense white supremacy in Canadian society. Through the media's dehumanizing voice and criminalizing language towards Black people, these historically racist perspectives strengthened Canada's ties to slavery, and remains an enduring source of trauma in the 21st century Black community. Yet, recognizing the press' powerful influence on racialized servitude also bolsters the efforts of the Canadian media to reconcile with its colonial past and forge onward as an agent for social change endorsing the present Black Lives Matter campaign.

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<sup>1</sup> Natasha L Henry, "Underground Railroad," The Canadian Encyclopedia, February 7, 2006, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/underground-railroad>.

The racist undertones of the Canadian press are primarily observable through the vast array of slave advertisements which flooded the newspapers of this 18th century British Colony. The indubitable use of dehumanizing language in these advertisements exposed white Canadians to the notion of white supremacy and continues to trigger the long-lasting effects of systemic racism which ostracises Canada's Black community. Published slave advertisements are documents which can trace meaningful biographical sketches of enslaved Black people. In 18th century Canada, print culture promoted a racial bias through slave advertisements that dehumanized Black people through its brevity and materialisation of the human person, as presented in the Nova Scotian Archives virtual exhibit.

An excerpt from this archive published on May 30th, 1752, is "Sale of a woman (age 35), two boys (ages 12 and 13), two male teenagers (ages 18), and a man (age 30)", which captures the brief and dishonest nature of these advertisements.<sup>2</sup> This document dishonestly outlines the favorable selling features of those at hand - generating an imagery of desirable health and behavior. Professor Charmaine Nelson, however, contends that these advertisements were drawn succinctly in lies, ". . . because [the owner is] trying to sell someone, literally, who [was] legally deemed to be chattel or movable personal property."<sup>3</sup> Nelson continues that the press riddled slave advertisements with lies, so as to secrete slave defects, and objectify the person in bondage as a material commodity. Similarly, "Boy for Sale Advertisement," published on March 28th,

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<sup>2</sup> "Sale of a woman (age 35), two boys (ages 12 and 13), two male teenagers (ages 18), and a man (age 30), 30 May 1752" African Nova Scotians in the Age of Slavery and Abolition, virtual exhibit, Archives of Nova Scotia (<https://archives.novascotia.ca/africanns/archives/?ID=4>, accessed 23 November 2021).

<sup>3</sup> "Nova Scotia's Slave History Largely Erased," interview by Jeff Douglas, Mainstreet Nova Scotia, CBC, 6 July 2021 (<https://www.cbc.ca/listen/live-radio/1-37-mainstreet-ns/clip/15853518-nova-scotias-slave-history-largely-erased-fit-stereotypes>, accessed 24 November 2021).

1775, is also formatted with a degrading materialisation of African Canadians.<sup>4</sup> Described with phrases such as “likely well-made”, the worth of these slave boys was often equated to that of livestock; where its owners search for the fastest disposal, yet best profit from this transaction. As evinced, slave advertisements delivered two societal norms to pre-Confederation Canadian culture: the debasement of indentured Black persons and the dangerous concept of white superiority. The demeaning shadow which the press inflicted upon purchasable slaves continues to isolate the Canadian Black community in the 21st century. Yet, Canadian professor, Harvey Amani Whitfield, offers that the crux of examining these documents is in providing a story to the life behind these notices, and restoring those enslaved as significant players in pre-Confederation Canadian history.<sup>5</sup> Undeniably, print culture in 18th century Canada utilized slave advertisements to promote the racialization of Black people, illuminating the Maritime’s widely traumatic slave trade, and the present vestiges of white supremacy and colonialism.

The use of criminalizing language in fugitive slave advertisements is another product of print culture which strengthens Canada’s historical ties to slavery. Runaway slave notices depict Black people challenging the social order envisaged by their owners and demonstrates how deeply entrenched structural racism hindered Black resistance and agency; a repercussion of slavery which continues to be prevalent in the lives of 21st century Black Canadians.<sup>6</sup> Found in the Nova Scotian Archives of 1781 is “Runaway Slave Advertisement for James, Property of

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<sup>4</sup> “Boy for Sale Advertisement, 28 March 1775” African Nova Scotians in the Age of Slavery and Abolition, virtual exhibit, Archives of Nova Scotia (<https://archives.novascotia.ca/africans/archives/?ID=11>, accessed 15 October, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> “White Archives, Black Fragments: Problems and Possibilities in Telling the Lives of Enslaved Black People in the Maritimes,” *Canadian Historical Review* 101, 3 (September 2020): 323-45.

<sup>6</sup> Harvey Amani Whitfield, “Runaway Advertisements and Social Disorder in the Maritimes: A Preliminary Study,” in *Violence, Order, and Unrest: A History of British North America 1749-1876*, ed. Mancke, Bannister, McKim, and See (University of Toronto Press, 2019)

Abel Michener of Falmouth,”<sup>7</sup> This document promotes slaveholding as an integral part of 18th century society, through its racially derogatory and detailed description of the absconded person and the large print and capitalization of “NEGRO” at the top of the advertisement. Contrasting starkly from slave advertisements, fugitive notices use imagery and vision to individualize Black slaves, and often reveal the horrifying labour conditions, abuse, or sexual assault endured by these persons.<sup>8</sup> Charmaine Nelson contends that the detailed visual portraits in runaway advertisements are drawn up by slave owners in strategically and “. . . disastrously colonial terms,” so as to clearly segregate African Canadians from the literate white public.<sup>9</sup> This critique is significant because it reveals that the criminalizing language used in fugitive advertisements was a symptom of 18th century white hegemony. In conclusion, the press allied with white slave owners to incentivize the hunt and recapturing of fleeing Black persons, ultimately, promoting racist tendencies in pre-Confederation Canadian society.

Similarly, “Fugitive slave advertisement,” published in September of 1772, is also formatted in excessive detail pleading for the recapturing of a slave girl, Thursday.<sup>10</sup> This advertisement bluntly publicizes the owner’s physical assault against her, a mechanism 18th century press utilized to normalize Black violence, strengthening Canada’s ties to racism. Yet, this advertisement only voices the contempt of a Black slave from the white, colonialist slave owner perspective, who aims to reassert control from its runaway slaves. Charmaine Nelson

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<sup>7</sup> “Fugitive slave advertisement, 1 September 1772” African Nova Scotians in the Age of Slavery and Abolition, virtual exhibit, Archives of Nova Scotia (<https://archives.novascotia.ca/africanns/archives/?ID=10>, accessed 15 October 2021).

<sup>8</sup> “Nova Scotia’s Slave History Largely Erased,” interview by Jeff Douglas, Mainstreet Nova Scotia, CBC, 6 July 2021 (<https://www.cbc.ca/listen/live-radio/1-37-mainstreet-ns/clip/15853518-nova-scotias-slave-history-largely-erased-fit-stereotypes>, accessed 24 November 2021)

<sup>9</sup> “Nova Scotia’s Slave History Largely Erased,” interview by Jeff Douglas, Mainstreet Nova Scotia, CBC, 6 July 2021 (<https://www.cbc.ca/listen/live-radio/1-37-mainstreet-ns/clip/15853518-nova-scotias-slave-history-largely-erased-fit-stereotypes>, accessed 24 November 2021).

<sup>10</sup> “Runaway Slave Advertisement for James, Property of Abel Michener of Falmouth, 22 May 1781” African Nova Scotians in the Age of Slavery and Abolition, virtual exhibit, Archives of Nova Scotia (<https://archives.novascotia.ca/africanns/archives/?ID=16>, accessed 23 November 2021).

explores how the press used fugitive advertisements to call upon slave owners and the average white populace to hunt for escaped Black slaves; making permissible their interrogation and harassment of Black Canadians, which is another facet of white supremacy in this Maritime culture. Nelson continues that the press instituted this widespread discrimination as “a system of surveillance that is built into the landscape of transatlantic slavery, that would have been really impossible for Blacks to evade. . .”.<sup>11</sup> This surveillance further illustrates the damaging effects the media imposed upon Black people.

Nelson’s podcasts and Whitfield’s scholarly work share the same theme in that they both stress the nature of white control in 18th century Canada. These discussions outline the undeniable interplay of print culture and white supremacy, which strengthened Canada’s ties to slavery. This connection is reiterated in Nelson’s recorded lecture with NSCAD University, as she explains how fugitive slave ads shaped the social construct of blackness.<sup>12</sup> Nelson reveals that the endurance of the Canadian slave trade relied upon the erasure of blackness from African Canadians. Ironically, however, print culture capitalized on the individuality of blackness, and used this as an effective tool to lead to identification and capture of runaway slaves.<sup>13</sup> Blackness, both dehumanized and criminalized the 18th century Black slaves. Yet, this indelible racism continues to stain the lives of the 21st century Black community. The present Black Lives Matter movement abhors the role of the media in influencing the criminalization of the Black community, as the press continues to foster a racial bias among the Canadian judicial system. For these reasons, fugitive slave advertisements reveal not only a dangerous taste of white supremacy

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<sup>11</sup> “What Black People in the British Empire Endured,” interview by Jeff Douglas, Mainstreet Nova Scotia, CBC, 6 July 2021 (<https://www.cbc.ca/listen/live-radio/1-37-mainstreet-ns/clip/15853518-nova-scotias-slave-history-largely-erased-fit-stereotypes>, accessed 24 November 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Charmaine Nelson, “Grappling with the Colonial Archive: An Introduction to Canadian Slavery,” recorded lecture at NSCAD University (2 March 2021)

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in 18th century Canadian society, but one which has caused a long-lasting impact on Canada's relationship with the Black community.

In conclusion, the prejudiced voice of the 18th century press exacerbated the growing culture of racism within Canada, and caused an enduring damage to the Black community. The media in pre-Confederation Canada overwhelmed its populace with an array of published advertisements encouraging both the sale of slaves and apprehension of fugitive runaways. These notices were pervaded with derogatory racial connotations and the conspicuous insinuations of white supremacy. The dehumanizing nature of slave advertisements promoted the materialisation and commodification of Black persons as they were branded like chattel, and equated to livestock. Further, the criminalizing language of runaway advertisements employed a century-long tradition of white superiority, threatened only by the ultimate test of Black agency and resistance: running for freedom. The racist affiliations found in both the analyzed slave advertisements and fugitive runaway notices reveal the perils of racism imposed on Black Canadians. In a collective effort to address the epidemic of white superiority which plagued Nova Scotians, both Whitfield's and Nelson's sources explore the themes of media control and discrimination, where the press was an evident tool for colonialism. 18th century Canada was an era of segregation, surveillance, and suppression, opening wounds of racism whose scars still sting in the 21st century Black community. It is only the passage of time which can determine if the role of the Canadian press will evolve for racial justice, as advocated by the Black Lives Matter movement, or continue to hum the transatlantic tunes of slavery which surely ring on the seas and shores of this nation.