Of Segregation, Surveillance and Suppression: �

The Power of the Press in 18th Century Canada

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1775, is also formatted with a degrading materialisation of African Canadians.

4 Described with

phrases such as “likely well-made”, the worth of these slave boys was often equated to that of

lifestock; 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.

5 Undeniably, print culture in 18th century Canada utilized slave advertisements

to promote the racialization of Black people, illuminating the Maritime’s widley 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.

6 Found in

the Nova Scotian Archives of 1781 is “Runaway Slave Advertisement for James, Property of

6 Harvey Amani Whitfield, “Runaway Advertisements and Social Disorder in the Maritimes: A Preliminary

Study,” in Violenc e, Order, and Unrest: A History of Bri tish North America 1749-1876, ed. Mancke, Bannist er,

McKim, and See (University of Toronto Press, 2019)

5 “White Archives, Black Fragments: Problems and Possibilities in Telling the Lives of Enslaved Black

People in t he Maritim es,” Cana dian Hi storical Review 101, 3 (September 2020): 323-45.

4 “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.a es a exhBoy f ricanns/archives)s(

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Abel Michener of Falmouth,”.

7 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

slaved, and often reveal the horrifying labour conditions, abuse, or sexual assault endured by

these persons.

8 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 cleary segregate African Canadians from the literate white public.

9 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

rascist tendencies in pre-Confederation Canadian society.

Similarly, “Fugitive slave advertisement,” published in September of 1772, is also

formatted in excessive detail pleaing for the recapturing of a slave girl, Thursday.

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explores how the press used fugitive advertisements to call upon slave owners and the average

white populace to hunt for escaped Black slaves; making permissable 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. . .”.

11 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.

12 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.

13 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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