NEITHER INDIGENOUS, NOR SETTLERS: THE PLACE OF AFRICANS IN CANADA'S 'FOUNDING NATIONS' MODEL

CHARMAINE A. NELSON

Charmaine A. Nelson is an Associate Professor of Art History at McGill University. Her research and teaching interests include postcolonial and black feminist scholarship, Trans Atlantic Slavery Studies, and Black Diaspora Studies. She is the author of five books, including *Ebony Roots, Northern Soil: Perspectives on Blackness in Canada*, published in 2010. Her sixth book, *Slavery, Geography, and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Marine Landscapes of Montreal and Jamaica*, will be published this year.

The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them.
— Edward Said, Culture and Imperialism, 1993

Settlers are founders of political orders and carry their sovereignty with them.
— Lorenzo Veracini, Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview, 2010

Canadian national identity cannot be separated from its imperial roots as a part of the British and French empires, the transatlantic world through which the metropoles became fattened by the trade in slave-produced plantation goods. As Said advised, control of narration was a centrepiece of colonial power, underpinning the imperial project of geographical expansion. But Veracini reminds us that the role of the settler was both ideological and material in the replication of Europe in the "New World" and the imposition of the citizen as white.

Canada's too frequent excision from its imperial transatlantic origins facilitates the pervasive myth of racial tolerance and the erasure of "other" founding peoples like Africans, who were neither indigenous nor settlers. Indeed, slavery was a part of Canada's early colonizing efforts and entailed both the local enslavement of indigenous and African people and the overseas investment in tropical plantation slavery in the Caribbean. Printed in the *Halifax Gazette* in 1752, one notice listed the sale of six enslaved Africans, the first described as "A very likely Negro Wench, of about thirty five Years of Age, a Creole born."[1] As William Renwick Riddell has explained,

1 Joshua Mauger, "Advertisements, JUST imported," *Halifax Gazette*, May 30, 1752, p. 2.

Creole indicated a Caribbean origin.[2] Meanwhile, a 1797 business ledger recorded the commercial transactions for thousands of gallons of rum (puncheons) imported from the slave-holding territories of the British Caribbean by the Montreal-based, Scottish merchant James McGill.[3] Therefore, like many others of his and lower classes, McGill not only enslaved indigenous and African people in Canada, but was enriched by his participation in plantation slavery elsewhere.[4]

Although French and British practices of slavery date back to the 17th century, and the first known black visitor arrived in 1605 (Mathieu da Costa), most Canadians are woefully ignorant of these histories. Instead, we are early taught to celebrate our liberation of African-American slaves during the Underground Railroad (1833-1861), and to vilify our American neighbours for their practice of plantation slavery. But what is excised in this process of selective amnesia is the more than 200 years when we (Canadians) were also slaving.

Indeed, the forays into slaving by the "founding nations" were by no means accidental. In 1688, the colonial administrator of New France, Jean-Baptiste de Lagny (Sieur des Bringandières), petitioned the governor, Jacques-Réné de Brisay (Marquis de Denonville), and the intendant, Jean Bochart de Champigny, to appeal to France for slaves. The petition explicitly advocated for the importation of African (Negro) slaves, citing the extraordinary expense of labour in the colony as a hindrance to enterprise, which could be remedied through slave labour.[5] By the mid-18th century, slavery was also firmly entrenched in places like Nova Scotia, where slave sale and fugitive slave advertisements became a staple in the *Halifax Gazette*. But while we are accustomed to thinking of the French and the British as mortal enemies, such hostilities were soon suspended in the pursuit of shared colonial profit underpinned by the disenfranchisement of specific racial populations. Thus, although fierce adversaries in other regards, the French and British in the region agreed upon the necessity of the preservation of slavery. As Robin Winks explained, after 1760, slavery was "specifically protected by the terms of the treaty of capitulation between Britain and France."[6]

But if narration includes not just official, but also unofficial representation, traces, and utterances, and if to be a founder is not merely to possess the ideological power and material control of the land, but to carry out the actual hard labour of the colony, then enslaved and free blacks and indigenous people, too, were founding populations. However, since the plight of any socially marginalized group

2 William Renwick Riddell, "Slavery in the Maritime Provinces," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (July 1920), p. 360.

3 James McGill, Cash Book, accession #: 0000-1207.01.0, McGill Archives, McGill University, Montreal.

4 Marcel Trudel, *Dictionnaire des Esclaves et de leurs Propriétaires au Canada Français* (La Salle: Éditions Hutubise HMH Ltée, 1990), p. 108; Frank Mackey, *Done with Slavery: The Black Fact in Montreal* 1760-1840 (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), pp. 72, 443 (note # 130).

5 Robin Winks, "The Blacks in Canada: a History," *International Journal of Canadian Studies*, vols. 33-34 (2006), p. 16.

6 Winks, "The Blacks in Canada," p. 23.

is the loss of self-representation, black Canadians (especially the enslaved) have been historically bereft of the cultural, economic, and material resources, and leisure time to leave significant traces of their lives. They were denied the ability to implement and control their own Canadian narratives and to have such narrations legitimized and preserved.

But one archive that clearly reveals the ongoing resistance of historical black Canadians to the deprivations, surveillance, and violence of slavery, is the fugitive slave archive. Attempting to recapture one's slave necessitated the disclosure of details, which were unhelpful to the idea of slaves as controlled, idle, unintelligent property. When, in 1779, the enslaved black woman Cash escaped from the Quebec City tailor, Hugh Ritchie, he placed a detailed advertisement, which read in part:

> *"RAN-AWAY, From the Subscriber…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*…it is likely she may change her dress…(sic)".*[7] (italics mine)

Ritchie's notice implied that Cash was a criminal, not just for her paradoxical act of "self-theft," but for absconding with "Effects not her own."[8]

But the details of Cash's escape also revealed the possibility of refined clothing as disguise for an enslaved fugitive looking to "pass" as free. What is striking about Cash's clothing is not the mere quantity with which she escaped (a sign of her intelligence and forethought), but its refinement and quality. While the clothing of the enslaved was regularly described as old or worn, the drabness of the colours also telegraphed the age of the garments. In contrast, only one of Cash's items was described as old: a pair of stays.[9] The assortment of dress with which she escaped—"a black sattin Cloak, Caps, Bonnets, Ruffles, Ribbons, six of seven Petticoats"—proclaims not just very feminine attire, but also a distinctly upper class and non-utilitarian one.(sic)

While Rebecca Earle has noted that white 19th-century commentators on Caribbean and South American societies wrote disparagingly about the black female appropriation of upper class, white female fashion staples such as the parasol and gloves, for the ways in which such refined clothing contrasted with the sun-darkened, muscular bodies of enslaved females, it is unclear if clothing like Cash's engendered the attention and derision of whites in Quebec or Nova Scotia.[10]

While as David Waldstreicher has noted, most enslaved people would have possessed only one

7 Hugh Ritchie, "RAN-AWAY, From the Subscriber," *Quebec Gazette*, Nov. 4, 1779; reproduced in Mackey, "Appendix I: Newspaper Notices," pp. 323, 536 (note #34).

8 Marcus Wood, "Rhetoric and the Runaway: The Iconography of Slave Escape in England and America," in *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America, 1780-1865* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 79.

9 Ritchie, "RAN-AWAY".

10 Rebecca Earle, " 'Two Pairs of Pink Satin Shoes!': Race, Clothing, and Identity in The Americas (17th – 19th Centuries)," *History Workshop Journal*, No. 52 (August 2001), p. 184.

set of clothes, Cash's bounty of dress was almost certainly the direct result of her enslavement by Ritchie, a tailor.[11] However, rather than merely assuming that her knowledge of clothing production, repair, and maintenance was something imparted to her by Ritchie, we must instead ask to what extent Cash's enslavement and labour exploitation by Ritchie resulted in his profiteering from *her knowledge*. This is perhaps why, after stating that she had absconded with stolen "Effects," Ritchie also conceded that, "she has also taken with her a large bundle of wearing apparel *belonging to herself.*"[12] (italics mine)

A fundamental part of nation building is the management of "undesirable racial populations."[13] Such management acts to position these same populations as interlopers in the imperial project. If to accept the "founding nations" model is to centre certain white populations at the expense of reifying the marginalization of others, then it's time for another paradigm; one in which those like Cash, who did the heavy lifting, are also remembered and celebrated.

11 David Waldstreicher, "Reading the Runaways: Self-Fashioning, Print Culture, and Confidence in Slavery in the Eighteenth-Century Mid-Atlantic," *The William and Mary Quarterly* (April 1999), p. 252.

12 Ritchie, "RAN-AWAY".

13 Eva Mackey, *The House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), p. 23.