



ARTICLE

Runaways London: Historical Research, Archival Silences and Creative Voices

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Abstract

This article explores how popular historical knowledge and understanding can be deepened by collaboration between historians, creative artists, and editors, publishers and those who support and develop the creative arts. Historical research into enslaved people who escaped in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century London reveals much about their enslavers but very little about the enslaved people themselves. However, archival gaps and silences can be imaginatively filled, and those who engage with the historically inspired creative work can explore the nexus of historical research and artistic creativity. In this article the authors (a historian and two members of the creative industry) detail how their ‘Runaways London’ collaboration developed, and how the work of poets and artists, premised on extensive historical research, deepens our understanding of race and slavery in British history, achieving something that is beyond the reach of historical research and writing alone.

Keywords: London; slavery; poetry; art

RUN away from his Master, a Negro Man Slave, named Will, and sometimes goes by the Name of George. Whoever will apprehend the said Negro, and bring him to John Fielding, Esq; in Bow-street, Covent Garden, shall receive two Guineas Reward. He is a tall stout black Man, had on when he went away a blue Flannel Jacket, grey Breeches, checked Shirt, red Woollen Cap, and a Hat, (a Sea Dress) he also took with him an old thin blue Coat.¹

¹ *Public Advertiser*, 29 October 1757.

We know virtually nothing about the enslaved man named Will or George, other than the fact that in the autumn of 1757 he attempted to escape his enslavement in London. This short newspaper advertisement is quite likely the only surviving archival record of this man's existence, and it is one of many hundreds of similar notices published in British newspapers between the 1650s and 1780s. The 'runaway slave' newspaper advertisement was invented in London in 1655 and was utilised in the city for a half-century before spreading to the colonies where it would become the most ubiquitous evidence of resistance to slavery. These advertisements were at the heart of a research project funded by the Leverhulme Trust, and between 2015 and 2018 a team led by Newman located, transcribed and analysed these advertisements, eventually making them available in a searchable database. The first phase of the database features 836 advertisements from England and Scotland published between 1700 and 1779, and at present hundreds more from the period 1655–1780 are being processed for inclusion in the database.

The advertisements demonstrate that slavery's revolution in labour and race was as much a British phenomenon as a colonial one, and during the second half of the seventeenth century people in London, Bristol and elsewhere were intimately involved in the creation of racial slavery. Then and throughout the first three-quarters of the eighteenth century people of colour were brought into the British Isles by visiting colonists, merchants, government officials, ship captains, planters and other White Britons. Some came directly from West Africa, others from the Caribbean and North American colonies, and still more from the South Asian trading bases of the East India Company. Some were free or indentured, others were enslaved, and many were in a liminal state between freedom and slavery.²

² The legal status of enslaved people was unclear in England during the seventeenth and for much of the eighteenth century. At least one historian has concluded 'that slavery did not exist as an institution in England and Wales', while another suggested that Black people may have escaped because 'like their white counterparts, [they] did not always like their masters.' See Kathleen Chater, *Untold Histories: Black People in England and Wales during the Period of the British Slave Trade, c.1660–1807* (Manchester, 2009), 95; Susan D. Amussen, *Caribbean Exchanges: Slavery and the Transformation of English Society, 1640–1700* (Chapel Hill, 2007), 221. But most historians now agree that although quite different from Caribbean and American slavery, racial bondage in England was real and the enslaved were often vulnerable to a return to plantation slavery.

For scholarship on people of colour in the early modern British Isles see Miranda Kaufman, *Black Tudors: The Untold Story* (2017); Gretchen Gerzina, *Black London: Life before Emancipation* (New Brunswick, 1995); Catherine Molineux, *Faces of Perfect Ebony: Encountering Atlantic Slavery in Imperial Britain* (Cambridge, MA, 2012); Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, 1995); Imtiaz Habib, *Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500–1677: Imprints of the Invisible* (Aldershot, 2008); Amussen, *Caribbean Exchanges*; Folarin O. Shyllon, *Black Slaves in Britain* (Oxford, 1974); Norma Myers, *Reconstructing the Black Past: Blacks in Britain, 1780–1830* (1996); Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (1984); James Walvin, *The Black Presence: A Documentary History of the Negro in England* (1971); M. Dresser and A. Hann (eds.), *Slavery and the British Country House* (Swindon, 2013); D. Fraser, 'Slaves or Free People? The Status of Africans in England, 1550–1750', in *From Strangers to Citizens: The Integration of Immigrant Communities in Britain, Ireland and Colonial America, 1550–1750*, ed. R. Vigne and C. Littleton (Brighton, 2001), 254–60; V. C. D. Mtubani, 'African Slaves and English Law', *Pula:*

Many of the enslaved in Britain were children who were made to work in domestic service and, as Susan D. Amussen has observed, young Black male pages became 'an increasingly common accoutrement' of elite English women and men. Catherine Molineux has described these enslaved children as 'a form of social currency, consumed and displayed in a semiotic system of status'.³ Working as a page, a gentleman's manservant, a lady's maid, a coach driver or even a carpenter, craftsman or sailor in Britain was very different from labour on colonial plantations. The nature and conditions of the work undertaken by these people of colour appeared very similar to that of White British servants, many of them children, and very different from the labour of enslaved Black people in the colonies. Britons commonly referred to enslaved domestic and household workers as servants, but this was in part due to the fact that during the early modern period the word servant could include slavery: Tyndale's scriptures, the King James Bible and the Geneva Bible seldom used the words slave or slavery, instead referring to the enslaved as servants.⁴ Even the Israelites who escaped from slavery in Egypt were described as 'servants'. But appearances and language were deceptive and should not blind us to the experiences of enslaved people in Britain. Many were little more than children yet they had experienced the trauma of violent separation from family and community, the Middle Passage, and colonial plantation slavery. And they knew that they remained at the mercy of people who might easily take or send them to the hell of slavery in the plantation colonies, as happened to young men like Sambo (enslaved by Samuel Pepys) or Martin (enslaved by Robert Cunninghame Graham), both of whom were ripped from domestic service in Britain and sold into Caribbean slavery. Although some Black people in Britain were free, others were bound by the memory and the reality of colonial slavery, and their fear of being returned to the Caribbean, giving them strong motivations to escape. So real and so terrifying was this threat that one 'Negroe Servant' in England who was 'threatened by his Master, for some Misconduct, to be sent to the Plantations' responded by hanging himself in his owner's coal cellar.⁵ (The Middle Passage from Africa and then sale of the enslaved in the Caribbean is represented in [Figure 1](#).)

Botswana Journal of African Studies, 3 (1981), 71–5. We know far less about South Asians in seventeenth-century London, but there is a little more work in this field for the eighteenth century: see Emma Rothschild, *The Inner Life of Empires: An Eighteenth-Century History* (Princeton, 2011), 87–91, 291–9; and E. S. Filor, 'Complicit Colonials: Border Scots and the Indian Empire, c.1780–1857' (Ph.D. thesis, University College London, 2014), 205–14.

³ Amussen, *Caribbean Exchanges*, 179; Molineux, *Faces of Perfect Ebony*, 31. For more on religion, civility and rank in racial relations in Britain see Roxann Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (Philadelphia, 2010).

⁴ See Naomi Tadmor, *The Social Universe of the English Bible: Scripture, Society, and Culture in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2010), 82–118.

⁵ 'Yesterday a Negroe Servant', *Derby Mercury* (Derby), 22 June 1753. For information about Sambo's fate see Claire Tomalin, *Samuel Pepys: The Unequalled Self* (New York, 2002), 177, 405–6; Arthur Bryant, *Samuel Pepys, III: The Saviour of the Navy* (Cambridge, 1938), 270. These events took place well after Pepys had ceased keeping a diary. For information about Martin, see Robert Cunninghame Graham to Angus MacBean, 24 March 1773, Letter Book 1772, Graham Papers, National Library of Scotland, Acc 11335/18, 41.



Figure 1 'Forgotten journey of the enslaved', @ Tasia Graham, *Runaways London*, 31.

One of the most significant and widespread forms of resistance to slavery was escape, and this occurred in the British Isles just as it did in the American and Caribbean colonies. The newspaper advertisements generated by these escapes in Britain were short, rarely longer than 100 words. They appeared alongside mundane notices for lost or stolen property (including dogs and horses), and for books, medicines and other items for sale, showing that the enslaved were readily accepted by readers and advertisers alike as yet one more form of property. They were written by and from the vantage point

of enslavers, and the brief descriptions of people who had escaped and the clothing they wore often did not even include the name of the escapee. The advertisements are usually the only surviving records of the people who had escaped, yet they reveal very little about those seeking to free themselves. Newman has published a monograph and scholarly essays about these British freedom seekers, yet while we often know a great deal about enslavers, in many cases it has proved all but impossible to discover anything substantial about individuals who are little more than archival ghosts.⁶ Historians of the enslaved in Britain, especially those who challenged their bondage by escaping, are, in Saidiya Hartman's words, 'forced to grapple with the power and authority of the archive and the limits it sets on what can be known, whose perspective matters, and who is endowed with the gravity and authority of historical actor'.⁷ It is possible to tabulate broad numbers and patterns of gender, age, race and ethnicity, and on occasion to illuminate the cases of people for whom more records exist. But beyond these broad brush strokes the enslaved freedom seekers of early modern Britain can be only imagined, for almost every detail of these people and their lives has been lost.⁸

As he completed his book on freedom seekers in seventeenth-century London, Newman was eager to explore ways of having Black and South Asian Londoners creatively respond to his research, imaginatively filling in the gaps. Poetry and art can play a significant role in the decolonisation of the curriculum (both school and university) and a broader coming to terms with the reality and continued effects of slavery and colonialism. In collaboration with historians, and grounding their work in historical research, creative artists can help imagine lost histories in ways that broaden and deepen public understanding of a largely forgotten past. The violence and oppression of

⁶ Simon P. Newman, *Freedom Seekers: Escaping from Slavery in Restoration London* (2022); Newman, 'Freedom-Seeking Slaves in England and Scotland, 1700–1780', *English Historical Review*, 134 (2019), 1136–68; and Newman with N. Mundell and S. Mullen, 'Black Runaways in Eighteenth-Century Britain', in *Britain's Black Past*, ed. G. Gerzina (Liverpool, 2020), 81–98. See also Newman, 'Escaping Enslavement in Eighteenth Century Scotland', in *The European Experience of Slavery*, ed. R. von Mallinckrodt (Berlin, forthcoming), and 'Sugar Planters and Freedom Seekers in Seventeenth-Century London', *Early American Studies* (forthcoming).

⁷ Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York, 2019), xiii. Hartman has led the way in conceptualising the silence and violence of the archive with reference to enslaved Black people. See Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York, 2007), as well as Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia, 2016), and the essays in a special issue of the journal *History of the Present* entitled 'From Archives of Slavery to Liberated Futures?', edited by B. Connelly and M. Fuentes, 6 (2016), 105–215.

⁸ Recognising these gaps in the archive as an opportunity, the Runaway Slaves in Britain project team commissioned a graphic novel based on three Scottish advertisements. *Freedom Bound* was created with financial support from the Leverhulme Trust, the Economic and Social Research Council and the University of Glasgow, and it included research data accumulated about the three freedom seekers and their enslavers, as well as more advertisements, maps and other data. Each state secondary school in Scotland received thirty-five copies of *Freedom Bound*, and in many schools it has become part of teaching and learning about the slave trade and slavery. See W. Pleece, S. Khan and R. Jones, *Freedom Bound: Escaping Slavery in Scotland*, based on research by S. Newman and N. Mundell (Glasgow, 2018).

slavery is replicated in the archive in which the enslaved are silenced, and historians face enormous challenges in trying to reconstruct these histories in ways that do not replicate the power imbalances of the past. Poetry and art can creatively fill spaces of elision and silence, and working with young Black and South Asian creative artists promised to imaginatively fill some of the archival silences of those who resisted slavery in London, as well as enabling these creative artists to take ownership of their community's London history.⁹

In June 2020, as Black Lives Matter protests engulfed British cities in response to the murder of George Floyd a month earlier, Newman approached Birch, the publisher of Ink Sweat & Tears Press (IS&T). Birch and IS&T had worked with and published some of London's Black and South Asian writers and were about to set up an editing internship programme for poets from these communities and other ethnic minority groups.¹⁰ Birch then discussed the idea of a publication of creative work about London's enslaved freedom seekers with several writers, including Mona Arshi and Rishi Dastidar, chair of Spread the Word, a London-based writer development agency. Committed to making literature 'more inclusive of all voices', Spread the Word has developed the ongoing Young People's Laureate for London scheme; the Complete Works (2008–10) a mentoring scheme for advanced Black and Asian poets; and the current Flight 1000 Associate scheme, funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and providing training and support for writers from diverse backgrounds to enter the publishing industry. Spread the Word was the ideal organisation to coordinate the project, and Birch then approached Ruth Harrison, its director.¹¹

Newman, Birch and Harrison were then joined by Peggy Brunache, a Haitian-American lecturer in the history of Atlantic slavery and director of the Beniba Centre for Slavery Studies at the University of Glasgow. In a series of meetings, the four established the Runaways London project group, and they agreed to secure funding to commission work by young Black and South Asian poets and artists. The Runaways London project would then publish the poets' and artists' work as a book; commission a short film about the creation of these works; and make the book, the film and teaching materials for schools freely available online. Newman applied for and secured awards from the British Association for American Studies/United States Embassy Small Grants Programme, and the Economic and Social Research Council, Impact Acceleration Scheme. Brunache secured further funding from the University of Glasgow, and Birch solicited donations from private individuals within the City of London's insurance/reinsurance industry. Finally, Harrison made a successful application for significant funding from the City of London

⁹ For consideration of the silence and violence of the archive and the need for creative approaches see Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, and *Lose Your Mother*; Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*; Connelly and Fuentes (eds.), 'From Archives of Slavery to Liberated Futures?'; and Sunny Singh, 'Writing about Minoritised People', <https://twitter.com/ProfSunnySingh/status/1423335297245454345>, 5 August 2021.

¹⁰ Ink Sweat & Tears, <https://inksweatandtears.co.uk>, accessed 26 March 2022.

¹¹ Spread the Word, <https://www.spreadtheword.org.uk/about-us>, accessed 15 March 2022.

Corporation – Central Grants Programme. Altogether the project leaders secured about £35,000. As the project developed, Birch contacted the director of the Museum of London, Sharon Ament, and then Finbarr Whooley (director of Content) and Glyn Davies (head of Curatorial), and this enabled the planning of a launch event at the museum's Docklands site, home of the *London, Sugar & Slavery* permanent exhibit. More events were projected, to be organised after publication of the creative work and film.

Newman then set about translating his research into a portfolio of materials for the 'creatives', the writers and artists. This included primary sources and a brief historical analysis of London and England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, of how slavery worked in the British Isles, and how free and enslaved people of colour lived in the capital. The completed dossier included several case studies, each beginning with a single advertisement for a freedom seeker and then developing contextual information about the enslaver, other people mentioned in the advertisement, the nature of the London locations specified in the text, and whatever could be surmised about the freedom seekers themselves.

Many of the freedom seekers identified in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century advertisements were children or young adults, and the Runaways London project team agreed that it was appropriate to seek to commission young Black and South Asian artists and writers (under the age of thirty). Harrison at Spread the Word began by approaching two poets: Momtaza Mehri, 2018 Young People's Laureate for London, and Gboyega Odubanjo, a published poet and editor of the highly regarded *bath magg*. At the same time Harrison approached the illustrator Olivia Twist, whose work has explored overlooked narratives and documented social history. All three were enthusiastic and were commissioned to produce work for the project. Spread the Word then issued an Open Call for applications from emerging poets and artists in May 2021.

Some applicants made clear that they felt drawn to the project because it not only resonated with their racial heritage but with the otherness that they were feeling as queer and non-binary people. What united almost all of them was the fact that they were unaware or barely aware of the presence of enslaved Black and South Asian people in Britain in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century London. But despite that, applicants repeatedly articulated their strong sense of commitment to the project and the need for this history to become centre stage with a focus on the colonisation, oppression and commodification of the enslaved in this period of London history. The applicants made it very clear that this was not just about the past, and that their growing awareness of this history and the work they were producing clearly resonated with their own experiences in present-day London and Britain. In June 2021 Birch and Harrison shortlisted and then interviewed the finalists, eight writers and three artists, before selecting the poets Memoona Zahid, Oluwaseun Olayiwola and Abena Essah, and the illustrator Tasia Graham. With Mehri, Odubanjo and Twist, the team of seven 'creatives' was complete.

After several initial Zoom meetings between all of the creatives and the project team, the latter realised that given the difficult and emotive subject, less

formal meetings and discussions might be better and more productive for the creatives. Several of the creatives contacted Newman to discuss and ask questions about his research, and many of them met with Brunache. Al-Amoudi had joined the project team (he was then working as the IS&T editing intern). As someone of African descent, and as both a history graduate and a writer, he was well positioned to become the primary contact for the creatives. He set up Zoom meetings where he would introduce the session and then leave the writers and artists to discuss the project among themselves. From this point, Al-Amoudi became the creatives' main point of contact.

As they delved into the research materials for *Runaways London*, none of the writers were surprised by the 'depth and pervasiveness of human horror', to quote emerging poet Olayiwola.¹² The dehumanisation of freedom seekers, the erasure of their indigenous identities, and the persistent threat of plantation slavery was nothing new to the artists, but they were able to ask questions of the sources, of the silence within, that aren't usually asked and are even more rarely answered in traditional historical research and writing. An academic essay can analyse what is there but can, at best, only speculate on the shape of what is missing. For example, the creatives referred often to physical violence being inflicted on enslaved servants in London even though there is no direct historical evidence to prove that this took place, although it surely did occur. Violence by masters and mistresses against the White servants and apprentices who dominated London's workforce 'was a regular event in early modern society', and Samuel Pepys and his wife were typical in their habitual beatings of young servants. Given that extreme violence against enslaved people was routine on slave ships and in the colonies, and that violent chastisement of White servants was routine in England, it seems reasonable to assume that the enslaved in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century London faced violent abuse, despite the lack of surviving archival evidence.¹³

A poem or an artistic work is a break in that archival silence that grabs its reader or viewer by the collar and demands their attention. A poem or an image is urgent and has the freedom to imagine what was and what could have been. The writers and artists took this approach to the project and imagined the lives that eluded historians hampered by archival silences, while recognising the limits of what can never be known. They asked what happened, who it happened to and when it happened, but crucially they asked, 'but how did it feel?'¹⁴ The reward of imaginative historical work by creatives includes the ability to find an emotional resonance with the reader as

¹² Oluwaseun Olayiwola to Kate Birch, 21 January 2022.

¹³ S. D. Amussen, 'Punishment, Discipline, and Power: The Social Meanings of Violence in Early Modern England', *Journal of British Studies*, 34 (1995), 1–34, at 13. For more on servants and apprentices in London's population see Newman, *Freedom Seekers*, 8–12; Ann Kussmaul, *Servants in Husbandry in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1981); Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos, *Adolescence and Youth in Early Modern England* (New Haven, 1994). For more on violence against servants see Tim Meldrum, *Domestic Service and Gender 1600–1750: Life and Work in the London Household* (Harlow, 2000), 92–3; and G. T. Smith, 'Expanding the Compass of Domestic Violence in the Hanoverian Metropolis', *Journal of Social History*, 41 (2007), 42–7.

¹⁴ Olayiwola to Birch, 21 January 2022.

well as an intellectual one, so that historians, curators, institutions and the general public are collectively engaged in a project to better understand our past.

The Runaways London project deals with harrowing stories of chattel slavery, domestic servitude and the violent recapture of Black and South Asian young people. Though the daily realities of these freedom seekers are unknown and there is fertile ground to reimagine their lives, should we be doing that work? Odubanjo asked these questions throughout this process as he grappled with the implication of writing from an incomplete archive and what the repercussions could be:

The process reaffirmed to me the idea that violence and violent acts don't exist in a vacuum; these things don't just happen once without further impact. Removing them [the enslaved] from their homes was a violence; enslaving them was another; their names were taken from them, their children; and, although we try to honour them today, that violence continues as we mine their lives for meaning.¹⁵

It is that last sentence that resonated most with the group. Was it fair to the freedom seekers that we rhetorically exhume their bodies, their lives and evoke their likeness, imagining their stories for meaning in the present, for social gain, even for financial gain? Saidiya Hartman, Marisa Fuentes, Jessica Marie Johnson, Jennifer Morgan and other historians of the Black Atlantic have all recognised that the archive itself is part of the problem, erasing enslaved Black and South Asian people as conscious and feeling individuals, often reducing them to a statistical presence in account books and similar records. How can we tell impossible stories, Hartman asked, and she proposed that historians should strain against the limits of the archive by undertaking what she termed 'critical fabulation', to imagine what cannot be verified. The result is 'a history of an unrecoverable past; it is a narrative of what might have been or could have been; it is a history written with and against the archive'.¹⁶ The artists involved in the project were hyper-aware of their position relative to those of the people they were writing about and what it meant to write humanity back into a space where humanity had been excised, all in a fashion shaped by and resonating with the impact of present-day events and concerns. Essah's, Olayiwola's and Mehri's poems all demonstrate this. Essah's narrative poem, 'Nothing's Changed', ruminates on the concept of Black bodies being hunted by authority in both eighteenth- and twenty-first-century contexts by showing young people who are chased by slave-catchers and then later fleeing imprisonment by the police.

¹⁵ Gboyega Odubanjo to Kate Birch, 11 November 2021.

¹⁶ Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', *Small Axe*, 26 (vol. 12, issue 2), June 2008, 10, 11, 12. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*; J. M. Johnson, 'Markup Bodies: Black [Life] Studies and Slavery [Death] Studies at the Digital Crossroads', *Social Text*, 36, issue 4 (2018), 57–79; Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Durham, NC, 2021).

Whoever should bring him back
 shall be rewarded with three guineas.
 Tall and sturdy negro boy.
 Black male with a history of violence.
 Call the metropolitan police
 if you see this dangerous suspect¹⁷

Essah also took it upon themselves to comb through the research for marginalised narratives within the Black community:

Moreover, as a queer non-binary person it was important for me to queer up the research. Precolonial queer ancestry is rich within the African continent and this fact should be widely known. Thus, telling a queer love story between two people of Ghanaian and Nigerian heritage not only gave me the chance to explore indigenous cultures and religions but it also allowed me to explore the truth – that queerness was and is a beautiful and common reality within the African continent.¹⁸

The creatives' work aligned with Hartman's injunction to paint as full a picture as possible of the lives of their subjects, 'straining against the limits of the archive ... [and] enacting the impossibility of representing the lives' of enslaved Black Londoners.¹⁹ Mehri asks the difficult question of what happened to those who sought and found their freedoms. What challenges did they face in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century London? What discriminations and barriers did they encounter as they entered the 'ever-mushrooming' city? Georgian London was hardly the most accepting or safe culture for vulnerable groups. Even though there was a burgeoning population of free Black and South Asian people in the city, members of this community faced institutional discrimination and hostility. Black and South Asian Londoners often had to deal with poverty, exclusion, a lack of social mobility and the risk of being kidnapped and sent into plantation slavery. From 1731 onwards, Black people were forbidden to learn trades, were not entitled to wages or poor law relief and were frequently subject to unjust imprisonment.²⁰ Mehri's poems suggest that it is one thing to no longer be bound, but it is another to have legal and financial freedoms. The impetus of her lyric sits comfortably between our own contemporary context and those of the freedom seekers:

¹⁷ Abena Essah, 'Nothing's Changed,' in *Runaways London: For the Enslaved Freedom-Seekers of the 17th and 18th Centuries*, ed. Fahad Al-Amoudi and Kate Birch (2021), 54–5. Hartman and others have warned against attempting 'anything as miraculous as recovering the lives of the enslaved or redeeming the dead', and Gayatri Spivak demonstrates not only that the subaltern cannot speak but that to pretend that they can reflects our own hubris. See Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', 11; G. C. Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (1988), 271–313.

¹⁸ Essah, introduction to poems, in *Runaways London*, 48.

¹⁹ Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', 11.

²⁰ Gerzina, *Black London*, 19.

... From here, the water is a blanket of possibility. Risk is gloriously circumstantial. Shorn of livery & lace, I inhale the fugitive smog, few possessions to weigh down this inconspicuous uniform of tatters. Mine, all mine ...²¹

This is where Mehri and Essah derive just some of the power of their verse. Overlaying contemporary concerns with the hopes, fears and realities of the past lights a fire of urgency in the work. In response to the question 'why should we resurrect freedom seekers?', they answer unequivocally that it is because their challenges are ours, that the effects of colonialism and slavery can be felt today.

The creatives' work was infused by their desire to problematise the language of the archive and the violence – both physical and psychological – it continues to purport. The source material itself placed Black and South Asian people in the same linguistic and physical plane as advertisements for items of clothing, job advertisements and other miscellaneous items in newspapers. It was a shocking and blunt statement that enslavers – with the support of newspaper editors – viewed Black and South Asian people as nothing more than chattels; and the lack of a challenge to this narrative risks reproducing this injustice. The writers underwent the work of celebrating the freedom seekers' humanity but in doing so they also challenged the established marginalisation of these figures. This was perhaps the riskiest element to the work and placed the writers in the most peril from a number of different interest groups. Odubanjo's poem, 'Proprietor Rap', showcases this most clearly. The poem was an exercise in satire that dexterously used the contemporary hip hop semantic field and syntax to problematise the language of the advertisements and the vocabulary of enslavers:

might just spend a boy on a necklace
 sell a boy for a pipe of madeira come
 by him come and buy a boy split
 the booty spin the yarn take the boy
 as gospel my assets have assets
 my boy has the painted-callico
 with the buttons call him a steal²²

Once again, his blurring of the modern with the historical created the dimension of urgency that gave the poem its impetus, and his choices in language heightened our understanding of how currency was placed on human life. Crucially, though, Odubanjo's poem was a persona poem, placing him directly in the mindset of those who exploited Black slave labour. It is an exemplary exercise in sensitivity and pathos, where the language of the poem invites you to engage critically in how strange the source material is, how different

²¹ Momtaza Mehri, 'Bankside, Breaking', in *Runaways London*, 13.

²² Odubanjo, 'Proprietor Rap', in *Runaways London*, 25.

face the idea that she may be Black-British, but she is not viewed as a citizen due to the colour of her skin, nor does she identify with the culture she once had. This illustration depicts the confusion and the loss of African identity, that many Black-British people face today with a loss in their culture and who they really are, through the effects of slavery.²⁷

Graham's point was borne out by a conversation broadcast on London-born David Lammy's LBC talk radio programme in March 2021, during which a caller insisted that Lammy was not entitled to describe himself as English 'Because you're African Caribbean!' Lammy took issue with this, and ended the conversation by lamenting 'How is that here in England you can only claim that Englishness effectively ... if you are White?'.²⁸

Twist, conversely, chooses to highlight all that is strong and positive about these freedom seekers: 'I kind of wanted to shift focus. In my practice, I use drawing as a tool to demonstrate worth.'²⁹ Like her fellow creatives, Twist reclaims their humanity, celebrates their resilience, glories in the fact that these young people slipped away down the same roads where her community lives, works and goes to school: 'Time and time again we are reminded of how we seem to have a knack for finding the small glimmer of joy, and fanning that.'³⁰ While the poets explore the imagined inner lives of London's enslaved people, the artists in their bold and confident work demanded that viewers acknowledge and accept the Black and South Asian presence in London, both past and present.

A common theme emerges from the writers and artists beyond their subject matter. They are all in the early stages of their careers and they took risks with form, structure and voice in order to ask difficult questions of the historical source materials. Their creative engagement with that data involved raising the question of whether such investigation is appropriate, and thereby encouraging readers, audiences and potentially students to consider that issue. The creatives' approach to the *Runaways London* project was successful in challenging the language of an archive filled with the words and actions of enslavers, and responding creatively within a space of violent elision. Al-Amoudi and Birch then worked to craft the creative work together with historical data and advertisements furnished by Newman and Brunache to give readers a fuller sense of context. It would be easy for readers to get lost in poetry and artwork that takes some knowledge for granted, so it was necessary for the editors to give the reader as many tools to understand the poetry and artwork as possible without asking the artists to explain themselves. Ultimately, the editors added some of the advertisements and contemporary images of London on the inside covers and throughout the anthology.

²⁷ Tasia Graham, Introduction to artwork, in *Runaways London*, 30.

²⁸ David Lammy speaking with Jean, LBC (Leading Britain's Conversation), 29 March 2021, <https://www.lbc.co.uk/radio/presenters/david-lammy/david-lammy-schools-caller-who-tells-him-hes-not-english>, accessed 13 December 2021.

²⁹ Olivia Twist, panel discussion at *Runaways London* launch.

³⁰ Olivia Twist, Introduction to artwork, in *Runaways London*, 60.

Location is of huge importance to the project; part of the surprise for a prospective reader or perhaps for students engaging with this would be the little-known information that slavery existed in London. It was therefore crucial that the anthology emphasised the areas of the city where freedom seekers would have found community, where they lived and where they escaped. Similarly, the advertisements placed before each writer's and artist's chapter (and on the inside covers) provided context to the figures they referenced in the work and allowed the reader into the world of the archive that the artists were working from. Reproduction of these advertisements is inherently problematic: as Marisa Fuentes has suggested, 'violence is transferred from the enslaved bodies to the documents that count, condemn, assess, and evoke them, and we receive them in this condition.' If we read an advertisement in which an enslaved child is described wearing a metal collar upon which the enslaver's name and address was engraved, we reimagine and symbolically reinscribe the violent dehumanisation of that enslaved child. Yet in most cases these advertisements – however deeply problematic they may be – are the only surviving evidence of the very existence of the enslaved people they described. As Ann Laura Stoler has suggested, we can read 'along the archival grain' and read much more in and through these advertisements than might be seen at first glance, helping return Black life, agency and culture in part through an archive that has all but erased it. The challenge facing us in this collaborative project was to balance the inherently problematic nature of the advertisements for freedom seekers with the fact that they were vital to our objective of imagining the real people behind the perfunctory, crass and often racist language used by enslavers to describe them. We worked with the poets and artists in 'subverting the discourse of the runaway ad[vertisements] and the gaze' of the enslavers who created them, thereby 'shift[ing] the epistemological weight of the archival document'.³¹

The organisation of the illustrations, expertly crafted by Twist and Graham, was placed specifically so that the art and the poetry supported each other in their affirmation of the humanity of the people behind the advertisements. Odubanjo's final poem, which explores the relationship between plantation slavery and slavery in London, immediately precedes Graham's illustrated narrative of a young woman of African descent being forcibly taken from her home and made to endure the Middle Passage (see [Figure 1](#)).³² Similarly, Essah's final poem, which describes a Black Ball, supports Twist's illustration of a London Black-owned tavern which hints of the present as well as the past.³³ (See [Figure 2](#).) The anthology is prefaced by an explanatory historical introduction by Newman and Brunache, and each poet and artist begins

³¹ Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 5, 29; Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, 2008). For more on this issue see, for example, Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* and 'Venus in Two Acts'; Johnson, 'Markup Bodies'; S. Smallwood, 'The Politics of the Archive and History's Accountability to the Enslaved', *History of the Present: A Journal of Critical History*, 6, no. 2 (2016), 118–32.

³² Odubanjo, 'Cousin', in *Runaways London*, 27; Graham, 'Forgotten Journey of the Enslaved', in *Runaways London*, 31.

³³ Essah, 'Bra Fie: For Sabinah', in *Runaways London*, 56–7; Twist, 'Black Owned Taverns', in *Runaways London*, 61.



Figure 2 'Black Owned Taverns', @ Olivia Twist, *Runaways London*, 61.

their own section with a personal reflection on the sources and their creative work. But rather than explaining their work, these introductions enabled the creatives to illuminate the ways in which their own understandings of and reaction to historical research inspired them to explore and imagine particular people, places and themes.

The importance of location to the artists, made clear in Graham's representation of work and escape in London in [Figure 3](#), was further emphasised with the film. This was coordinated by Tom MacAndrew (programme manager at Spread the Word) who also looked after the teaching resources and the project launch. Ashley Karrell of Panoptical produced *Runaways London*, featuring Brunache, Odubanjo and Essah, all filmed on location in the City of London.³⁴ Like the anthology, the film combines the historical references

³⁴ The film, a pdf of the book, and the teaching resources are all available at <https://www.spreadtheword.org.uk/projects/runaways>, accessed 15 March 2022.



Figure 3 'Escaped, captured and repeated', @ Tasia Graham, *Runaways London*, 33.

with the poems and the illustrations themselves. Brunache gives the context, Essah and Odubanjo provide the framework of their creative approach. There are images of the actual ads but these are also read aloud, their words typed across the screen to give emphasis. All five poets read their work, sometimes over Graham and Twist's striking illustrations, sometimes over images of the skyline and buildings of the City, an area that emerged from and thrived on the international commerce of the Restoration period that included human beings as commodities. Views of the Royal Exchange and Lloyd's of London

all reference this time, and even subtle hints of a compromised past are seen with film of the Jamaican Wine House on the site of the original Jamaican Coffee House (where enslaved people were bought and sold, and which was often mentioned in the runaway advertisements as the place to which they could be returned for a reward by any person who had recaptured them). A shot of the East India pub is a lingering shadow of the vast sway of the East India Company.

The project was launched in October 2021 at the Museum of London Docklands, featuring readings and discussions of their work by the creatives, and follow-up events included a similar event hosted by Lloyd's of London in March 2022. The venue was particularly appropriate given that the original Lloyd's Coffee House was often specified in advertisements as a location to which recaptured freedom seekers could be taken.

The trauma inherent within these seventeenth- and eighteenth-century advertisements can easily reach out and touch us today. The work of young, early-career Black and South Asian creatives in grappling with this history is nothing if not courageous. They rejected the easy choice of reproducing the content of fragmentary archival records, instead choosing to challenge those records and daring to imagine their histories. This is not work that historians can do easily, although it cannot happen without the foundations of historical research and knowledge. The collaboration between historians, literary editors and young creatives helped fashion 'a history of an unrecoverable past', providing glimpses 'of what might have been'. The work of the creatives fashioned a 'history written with and against the archive', expanding the historical consciousness and awareness of people across society.³⁵

³⁵ Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', 12.