



RUNAWAYS LONDON

TEACHING RESOURCE KS3/4
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THANKS

Runaways London is made possible thanks to the generosity of The British Association for American Studies/United States Embassy Small Grants Programme; Economic and Social Research Council, Impact Acceleration Award; University of Glasgow Knowledge Exchange (KE) Small Grants 2020/21; City of London Grants; Ian & Clare Branagan; Dominic Christian; Ross and Caitlin Curtis; Matthew and Fiona Fosh; Tom and Caron Ilube; Kevin and Jennie Lee O'Donnell.



INTRODUCTION

Between the 1650s and 1780s many hundreds of enslaved people were brought to London. Most were African although a significant minority were South Asian and a smaller number were indigenous American.

While enslaved in the capital some attempted to escape and, on occasions, those who pursued them placed advertisements in London newspapers seeking the capture and return of these freedom-seekers.

The Runaways London project has commissioned five poets and two artists to respond to these historical advertisements and create new poems and artworks which investigate the lives, stories and histories excluded from the advertisements.

This resource by poet Gboyega Odubanjo takes your class through their creative process to produce their own poems responding to this theme.

The Runaways London anthology containing all commissioned poems and artworks, further teaching resources and a short film about the project can be found at: spreadtheword.org.uk/runaways

ABOUT RUNAWAYS LONDON

Runaways London is an arts heritage programme which engages with archival evidence of enslaved Londoners of the 17th and 18th Century, who escaped their enslavement to find new lives in the City.

Working with research by University of Glasgow's Runaway Slaves in Britain project (runaways.glasgow.ac.uk), a team of young poets and artists of African and South Asian heritage developed a series of poems and artworks responding to so called 'runaway slave' advertisements published in London newspapers between the 1650s and 1780s.

Working on the project are poets: Momtaza Mehri, Gboyega Odubanjo, Abena Essah, Memoona Zahid and Oluwaseun Olayiwola and artists: Olivia Twist and Tasia Graham. Runaways London is managed by Spread the Word and the project publisher is Ink Sweat & Tears Press.

RESEARCHING THE LIVES OF ENSLAVED LONDONERS

Who inhabited 17th and 18th century London? Kings, courtiers and a few of the city's more affluent citizens have left us portraits of themselves and their families, and some of the buildings they constructed and the things that they owned survive, allowing us to feel the tenor of their lives. A few people like Samuel Pepys have left diaries and documentary records, while still more can be traced in court or church records. But although a few seventeenth-century Londoners speak to us through the archives most have left little or even no trace and we can imagine their lives in only the broadest and vaguest terms.

Londoners of African and South Asian origin are amongst the most invisible and silent of these historical figures, although there were a significant number in the capital. A number of them were sailors and dock workers, while a few were craftsmen, labourers and washerwomen. Most, however, were domestic servants in the households of elite and mercantile families who had spent time in or had connections with the British Empire's colonies. Some were free, a few were bound and indentured servants, but others were enslaved.

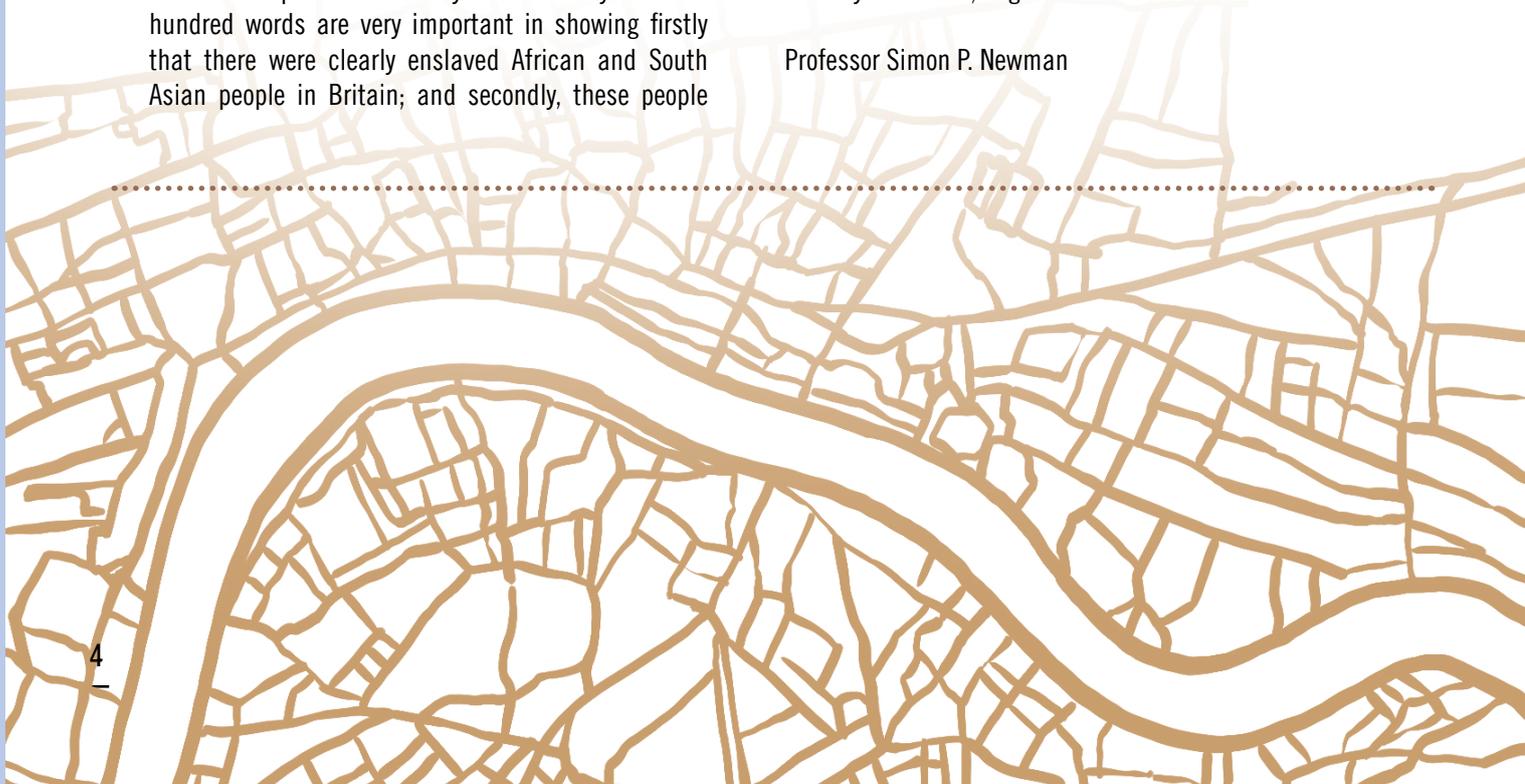
Without portraits or diaries, one of the ways we know about the existence of these enslaved Londoners is through many hundreds of short newspaper advertisements placed in newspapers by masters and enslavers who described and offered rewards for the capture and return of enslaved people who had escaped. Often called 'runaway slave' advertisements, these short pieces of usually between fifty and one hundred words are very important in showing firstly that there were clearly enslaved African and South Asian people in Britain; and secondly, these people

resisted by attempting to escape. The records also reveal that more of these advertisements appeared in London's newspapers than in those of any other city; and that the average age of these freedom-seekers was just 16 years old.

The Runaway Slaves in Britain project has located many hundreds of newspaper advertisements about enslaved escapees in the British Isles and made them accessible in an easily searchable database. In many cases these short advertisements are the only surviving record we have of a particular enslaved person, but even then they may tell us very little. Sometimes we don't even know the name of the freedom-seeker. We might learn whether they were of African or South Asian descent, how well they spoke English, the clothes they had been wearing when they escaped, and in some cases whether they were scarred by slave brands or had been forced to wear metal slave collars around their necks.

It is all that we don't know about London's freedom-seekers that encouraged us to develop this project, Runaways London. Compiling as much historical data as possible about enslaved people in London we gave this information to young poets and artists based in London and of African and South Asian heritage. We asked them to create works speaking to these archival silences; building from short runaway advertisements and developing ideas, impressions and stories about the brave Londoners, some of them little more than children, who dared to challenge their enslavers and run away into the City of London, eager to find better and freer lives.

Professor Simon P. Newman



ACTIVITIES

A Negro Boy named Goude, aged about 17, speaks no English, Run away on Sunday last at Six in the Evening, had on an old sad-coloured serge Coat, a pair of sad-coloured cotton Breeches, and an old black Tarrey Hat on his head. Whoever brings him to Lyme-house, to Mr John Woodfine, shall have Forty shillings Reward.

– The London Gazette, 23rd December 1686



FOUND POEMS BY GBOYEGA ODUBANJO

Subverting historical texts to create found poems



- Examine and investigate 17th and 18th century runaway advertisements
- Explore found poetry, and the construction of 'Classified'
- Discuss 'treated' and 'untreated' found poems and how to subvert and alter meaning in texts
- Select and edit texts to create a found poem

INTRODUCTION

A found poem is created by taking existing text, reworking it and presenting it as a poem. This is usually done by using words, phrases, or passages from other sources and altering them (by making changes in spacing and lines, or by deleting/adding text) to create new meaning.

Found poetry has similarities with collage-making in visual art. A popular example of found poetry is an 'erasure poem', where a poet takes an existing text and erases, blacks out, or obscures a large portion of it, creating a new work from what remains. This can be done to collaborate with an existing text or to challenge it.

Sometimes, when creating found poems, poets will challenge themselves to only use the words that they have found in the original text. This might also mean using a word the same amount of times it is used in the original text. A found poem that takes words from a text and doesn't alter them in any way (apart from line breaks and spacing) is often referred to as 'untreated', whereas when a writer changes the original text's order or syntax it is then seen as a 'treated' found poem.

RUNAWAY ADVERTISEMENTS

The poem 'Classified' uses quotations taken directly from newspaper advertisements which described enslaved people who had run away from their enslavers. These people placed advertisements in the hope someone would capture and return these freedom-seekers.

Quite often these advertisements didn't include the names of the enslaved people who had run away, or would only include Anglicised names they had been given by their enslavers. Often to identify them enslavers would instead rely on details such as physical descriptions, personality, or how well they spoke English.

Here is one such example:

‘Lost or stray’d on Monday Morning last, from the House of Mr Tobias Bowles, Merchant, in Buttolph Lane, a sturdy, thick, squat Negro Boy, aged about twelve Years, speaks very good English, inclinable to a tawny Complexion and woolly Hair close to his Head, a dark Cinnamon Coat, a strip’d Holland Jacket and Breeches: His Name is Mat, born in Maryland. If any Person brings him to the said Mr Bowles, they shall have full Satisfaction for their Pains.’

Post Man and the Historical Account, 10 September 1719

Other adverts are more explicit when outlining the rewards for catching enslaved people who had run away, for example:

‘RUN away, two Negro Girls, and Sisters, named Jane Gray and Maria Gray; Jane is short and well-set, with the Evil in her Neck, and now very much swelled, 18 Years of Age, and speaks good English; Maria is slender, and rather taller than the other, 16 Years of Age. Whoever will bring either of the above Negro Girls to Capt. Barrett, near Shadwell Church, or to John Fielding, Esq; shall receive one Guinea Reward for ea[c]h. They are Captain Barrett’s Property, and any Person harbouring or secreting them, will be prosecuted for the same.’

Public Advertiser, 20 November 1758



ACTIVITY

Read through these examples with the class and discuss the way in which the runaways are presented. How are they characterised? What do/don't they tell us about these freedom-seekers?

CLASSIFIED

Now read the poem 'Classified' below.

In pairs, ask the class to read the poem again, this time highlighting any elements that stand out to them and discussing them together. Feedback to the rest of the group and compare what was picked out.

The poem would be considered 'treated' as it changes the order of original texts and adds new words. Below is a list of the original phrases which appear in edited form in the poem.



- 'well-proportioned'
- 'mark of a diamond on each temple'
- 'several marks on his face being the mark of his country, particularly one on his forehead resembling a small sprig or flower'

Some other quotations appear in the poem unaltered, however sometimes they have been separated or combined.

Remaining in pairs, ask the class to read the poem again, this time looking specifically for moments that appear to be 'treated'.

Discuss these in pairs. What is the effect of such alterations?

When writing the poem I wanted to highlight the strangeness of referring to people not by their names but by what they looked like. Presenting people as objects whose sole purpose is to be bought and sold.

There were also many adverts which mentioned enslaved people who were 'wanting' — meaning missing — toes or teeth. When I questioned what else they might want my answer was relatively simple, they might want their names. Enslaved people were often referred to in objectifying terms, or often their original names would be either Anglicised or replaced entirely. Seeing the absence of names in so many of the advertisements led to me exploring the ways I could use the found text to develop the idea of the names these people were not given.

Do you think the poem manages to do this? In what way does reading the poem have a different effect on the reader than just reading the runaways advertisements? Discuss as a class.

CREATING A FOUND POEM

Now your students' challenge is to write their own found poems.



The Runaway Slaves in Britain project has a searchable database of runaways advertisements available at runaways.gla.ac.uk/database. The class can use this to search through the hundreds of entries, perhaps searching to look for advertisements from your area, or for runaways who were the same age as them.

Alternatively you could use the same approach to write about a story that is in the news at the moment. If you are using a current story try to get quotes from multiple sources (newspapers, social media, etc.)

Ask each student to think about one aspect of their chosen text that they want to focus on and pick quotations that mention it. For example, 'Classified' is based on quotations about the physical descriptions of enslaved people from runaways advertisements.

Now ask students to identify what it is that they want to say about the story they have chosen. Do they want to add to something that has already been said about it, or do they want to challenge the existing narrative?

Ask the class to use their selected quotations to begin creating their found poem. As they do this, ask them to consider whether they are able to say what they want just using the words/phrases they have picked out, or does the found text need to be 'treated'? If so, how can they change the context or meaning of the text that they have found? What can they add to it?

Once the class have finished their first drafts, ask them to share with the class. Do we notice which text is found and which is added? Can we tell the difference between 'treated' and 'untreated'? Has the poet managed to alter the meaning of the found text?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

If the class are happy to share their work, you can ask pairs to share with each other and to try and spot the treated and untreated text as above. Based on the feedback from their partner, ask students to work on a second draft thinking about how they can alter the text or use spacing and line breaks to blur the lines between treated and untreated to better put across their message.

RESOURCES

Lost or stray'd on Monday Morning last, from the House of Mr Tobias Bowles, Merchant, in Buttolph Lane, a sturdy, thick, squat Negro Boy, aged about twelve Years, speaks very good English, inclinable to a tawny Complexion and woolly Hair close to his Head, a dark Cinnamon Coat, a strip'd Holland Jacket and Breeches: His Name is Mat, born in Maryland. If any Person brings him to the said Mr Bowles, they shall have full Satisfaction for their Pains.

— Post Man and the Historical Account, 10 September 1719

CLASSIFIED

BY GBOYEGA ODUBANJO

we do not know the name black boy aged twelve well-set
with a good grasp of english has run described as agreeable
no vices the young fellow believed to be between eleven
and fifteen has been reported missing from listed address
in the west london area physical description states child
is well-proportioned woolly hair close to head like crown if anyone
is to apprehend the fourteen-year-old and return them a reward
twenty shillings breaking vanished has a west african black
said to struggle with the tongue full eyes all yellow
aged about seventeen heading eastward wanting of some toes a plea
lookout for indian black diamonds at their temples hair curled like the rest
three guineas for capture child still maturing we have been informed
clothed in drugget gown dark cinnamon hat public warned be vigilant
evil visible in her neck if approached by aforementioned black of adult age
this woman in the whitechapel area still wanting toes and front teeth
if she appears wanting of a name refusing english if she has a mark
on her face belonging to her country itself wanting of a name forehead
resembling flower blooming heading eastward still escort back forty shillings

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ABOUT THE ARTIST: GBOYEGA ODUBANJO

Gboyega Odubanjo was born and raised in East London. He is the author of two poetry pamphlets, *While I Yet Live* (Bad Betty Press, 2019) and *Aunty Uncle Poems* (The Poetry Business, 2021). Gboyega is an editor of *bath magg*.

Runaways London is an arts heritage programme which engages with archival evidence of enslaved Londoners of the 17th and 18th Century, who escaped their enslavement to find new lives in the City.

A team of young poets and artists of African and South Asian heritage developed a series of poems and artworks responding to so called 'runaway slave' advertisements published in London newspapers between the 1650s and 1780s.

These resources, created by the participating artists, lead your class through their creative processes to produce poems and artworks responding to the project.

Resources in this series are:

Black Balls and Shaped Poems by Abena Essah

Collage Illustrations by Tasia Graham

Reimagining 17th and 18th Century Runaways by Momtaza Mehri

Found Poems by Gboyega Odubanjo

Ekphrastic Poems by Oluwaseun Olayiwola

Black-Owned Tavern Portraits by Olivia Twist

Fragmentary Narratives by Memoona Zahid

The Runaways London anthology containing all commissioned poems and artworks, further teaching resources, and a short film about the project can be found at: spreadtheword.org.uk/runaways

