



RUNAWAYS LONDON

TEACHING RESOURCE KS3/4
MEMOONA ZAHID



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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 Memoona Zahid 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

An Indian black Girl, aged about 15, with a Brass Collar about her Neck, in a Drugget Gown and a Painted-Callico Petticoat, Run away from Captain John Bowers in Rotherhith, on Monday night last. Whoever brings her to Captain Bowers aforesaid, shall have a Guinea Reward, and Charges.

— The London Gazette, 22nd September 1690



FRAGMENTARY NARRATIVES BY MEMOONA ZAHID

Writing about escape and memory to create fragmentary narratives and experiment with the use of white space on the page



- Explore white space in 'A possible entrance to the moon'
- Use prompts to write from memory and capture detail
- Create metaphors and similes
- Collage material generated to create fragmentary narrative poems

'A POSSIBLE ENTRANCE TO THE MOON'



Put students in pairs and ask them to read the poem listening carefully as they pause at each of the line breaks and gaps on the page.

Ask them to go through it again using a coloured pencil to underline the moments where the most suspense is created (the spaces where the white space is like holding a breath, waiting to find out what happens next).

Words are important in the poem and so is the silence surrounding the words. This exercise will be key to when the students create their own poems using the below prompts.

DEFIANCE

Focus on the opening section of the poem: 'refusing the sound of the moon'.

Ask students to write down four objects, places, moments etc. which have been memorable to them. Ask them to think of physical sensations associated with those moments that they may have experienced — the feeling of happiness, or laughter, or sadness, or anger — what part of their body is it felt in? Is it their fists? Their eyes? Can they be as specific as possible? Ask them to use metaphor, simile, and other literary devices to capture these moments.



For all of the prompts in this resource, ask students to allow space on the page between their ideas, and to only use one side of the page - they will be cutting these out later. They also don't need to create full sentences or worry about spelling or grammar; they are just looking to generate ideas.

Now ask the class to look outside of the window, are there any natural objects which they feel drawn to? The sun, the grass, the sky — be specific, e.g. types of trees, microscopic insects etc. Again, jot these down to capture them.

Next, students should look inside the classroom, in their bag or pencil case — what objects hold a fond memory to them? Write down a sensory feeling attached to the object, or the moment, or the nature.

The speaker in the students' poems will end up 'refusing' these moments:

*'refuses the call of sunrise
refuses her stomach'*

ESCAPE

This prompt focuses on the middle section of the poem: 'whilst ripping out blades of grass she prayed'.

Ask students to think about a time they've wanted to escape. What kind of situation was it? An embarrassing one? One where they didn't feel welcome? Somewhere that was physically challenging? Any situation where they would do anything to get away from that moment.

Write down the situation in one sentence. In the following prompt, you'll discover how to get out of the situation.



Ask students to plunge back into the present of the poem and write about escaping the difficult situation they described earlier. What kind of things did they do when trying to get out of the situation? Did they pray? Ask a friend for help? Devise a plan in their minds? Ask students to be specific. What was the weather like? How did it feel on the skin?

Now ask students to write about the process of escaping that difficult situation. Focus on details which are physical. Was there a physical sensation holding them back? Were the hands and legs integral to the escape? Or was it an escape which occurred in the mind? What were the physical sensations their mind produced?

Ask the students to begin a sentence with one of their physical descriptions:

'my legs felt weak...'
my nerves were rattling...'

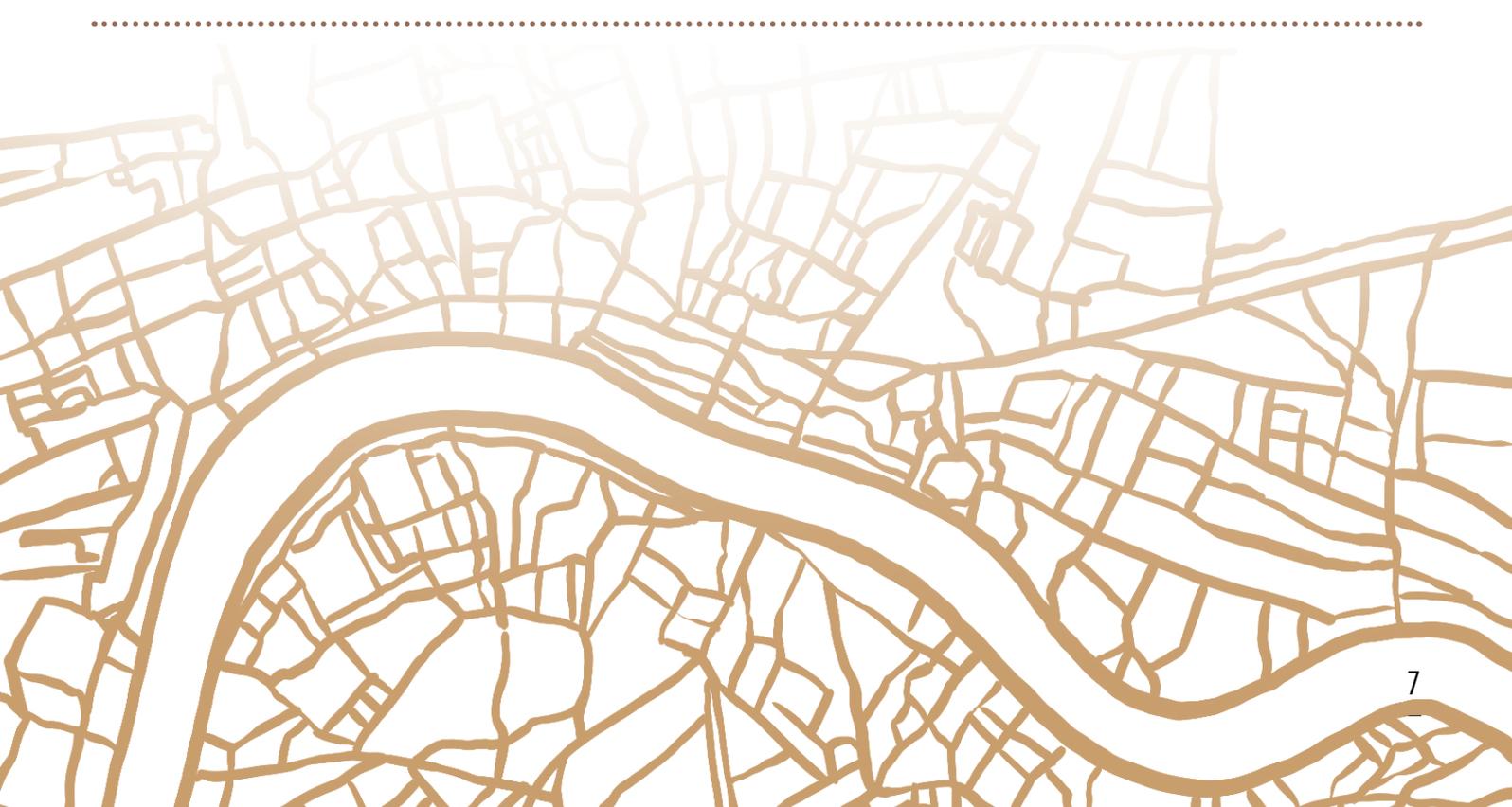
Now finish the sentence connecting the physical sensation with a more abstract feeling about their situation to create a metaphor or simile.

If students are stuck ask them to use 'like a' and then link the description back to their one-sentence description of the situation:

'my legs felt weak like a friend's betrayal'
'my pulse was racing like a run home in the dark'

These moments will create the speaker's escape in students' poems:

'around her neck the brass weighed like a promise ready to be broken'



MEMORY



Memory is important in the poem. Looking back to the past allows the poem to propel forward. Ask students to write about a memory they've kept close to them. Maybe a story they were told as a child. Or a saying that has stayed with them. Who told them this story? Where did it come from?

This memory will show what the speaker yearns for in their poems:

*'ba's words chant through her being
when you find emptiness
stay a while
remember the smell of tangerines
how each is one made by god just for you'*

CREATING A FRAGMENTARY POEM



Now that they have generated their material, students can start constructing their poems.

Firstly, ask the class to read back through everything they've written. Here they can make any edits or changes they'd like.

Now, using a pencil, ask them to circle the moments where they feel certain words or actions have the most emphasis. This is where suspense is lingering or held in the poem.

Finally, ask students to cut out individual sentences, phrases or sections that they've produced. Using A3 paper, ask them to move these sentences around the page creating a fragmentary poem. It can help to do this on different coloured paper so that it's easier to see the space around the lines.

The fragmentary nature of the poem means that events are not chronological; students can use any order. Students should pay particular attention to the parts they've circled and where they fall in the poem. Do they come before or after a gap on the page? How do they create a mood or a tension in the poem?

If necessary students can add additional lines or edit their existing material. Once they are happy with their poem, they can stick down their lines to create a finished version.

Ask any students who are willing to share their poems. They should read them out, and also show the rest of the class how it looks on the page.

RESOURCES

RUN away about twelve Days ago from his Master, a Black Boy with Wool Hair, about twelve Years old, with a gray Livery, trim'd with Green, and brass Buttons, and a Steel Collar on his Neck; whereon is engraved thus: (Quarw, belonging to Mr. G. Woodcraft, Attorney at Law in the Poultry, London) Whoever will bring him to his said Master, shall be satisfied for their trouble.

— Post Boy, 5 July 1718

A POSSIBLE ENTRANCE INTO THE MOON

BY MEMOONA ZAHID

she sneaks lavender from the gardens
slips it

under her pillow

drowsiness opens inside her
& fear
festers in her limbs but she sleeps

& refuses the sound of the moon
refuses the blisters on her palms

the same shape of ba's eyes

refuses the call of sunrise

refuses her stomach

its eternal presence like the wind humming against hanging
clothes

fear opens a fist at her neck
sickness is her only reprieve –

she imagines her sleep

becoming a grave

the soil littered with a field of fallen winter honey suckle
not ma or ba surrounding her
but gallons of soundless earth

;

every beginning is a middle so she begins
open

down her middle

a throat
torn apart

overripe apple

on the roof of her mouth
she remembers the name ba gave her

a mouth knows the shape of a word even when it's left unsaid

for years

her tongue traces

back & forth over her front teeth

she's waited to say it aloud

only now
like a bird
escaping its aviary
does she dare –

Pari

;

whilst ripping out blades of grass she prayed –
around her neck the brass weighed like a promise
ready to be broken

the sky

a whirlpool spinning out god's answer:

Run

Layla devised

the plan
hair tied up
sleeves rolled up

her face
like Moses after emerging from the ocean

in the other house
Layla's fingers bled
each bandage wound tight

half a moth glides on to her palm

ba's words chant through her being

when you find emptiness
stay a while
remember the smell of tangerines
how each is one made by god just for you

;

she had tried to escape once before
she wanted to disappear
dreams of her evergreen face
evaporating into fog
came to her like flying ants
suddenly everywhere

;

her teeth loud
rain-like
cold

the ceiling touches the tip of her head
a spider web against her eye
a fly hissing as the spider crawled

the world is an eye
it watches as she wanders through
the movement of her limbs

the inside of her arms
grey like the wings of the fly

the eye watches her mind as it forgets the shape
of the bones in ma's face

days after
her hands cradle her knees

Spread The Word

she yearns to belong to something light
her idea of heaven

or somewhere warm somewhere
with summer rain & Layla's voice

;

she had not expected this
her people with their arms speaking into other arms

the lull of their voices
in beat with the drums

the afterglow of a heavy sunset as it swims into the walls
the smell of bread

her mouth a child again
her mouth allowed to be a child again

she knows she's loved like this before

unrelenting

like cherries

cold against her forehead her cheeks

she swallows seed after seed
ripping apart the fruit with her teeth
savouring the ache in her throat as she beckons

a forest
to replace her physical being

;

Layla is nowhere

inside her eardrum

like the inside of a shell

lost

;

Pari casts her eyes over the river
instead of trembling water she sees
a crowd of faces like her own

mouths wide & wailing
the same song

among them ba & ma

floating up to the scintillating deep sun
the way the angels had gone
into a lavender infused sleep

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ABOUT THE ARTIST: MEMOONA ZAHID

Memoona Zahid is a poet and editor of Pakistani heritage, currently based in London, with work appearing in various publications. She is a Ledbury Poetry Critic and alumna of the University of East Anglia's Creative Writing Poetry MA.

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

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