



RUNAWAYS LONDON

TEACHING RESOURCE KS3/4
MOMTAZA MEHRI



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THANKS

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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 Momtaza Mehri 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.

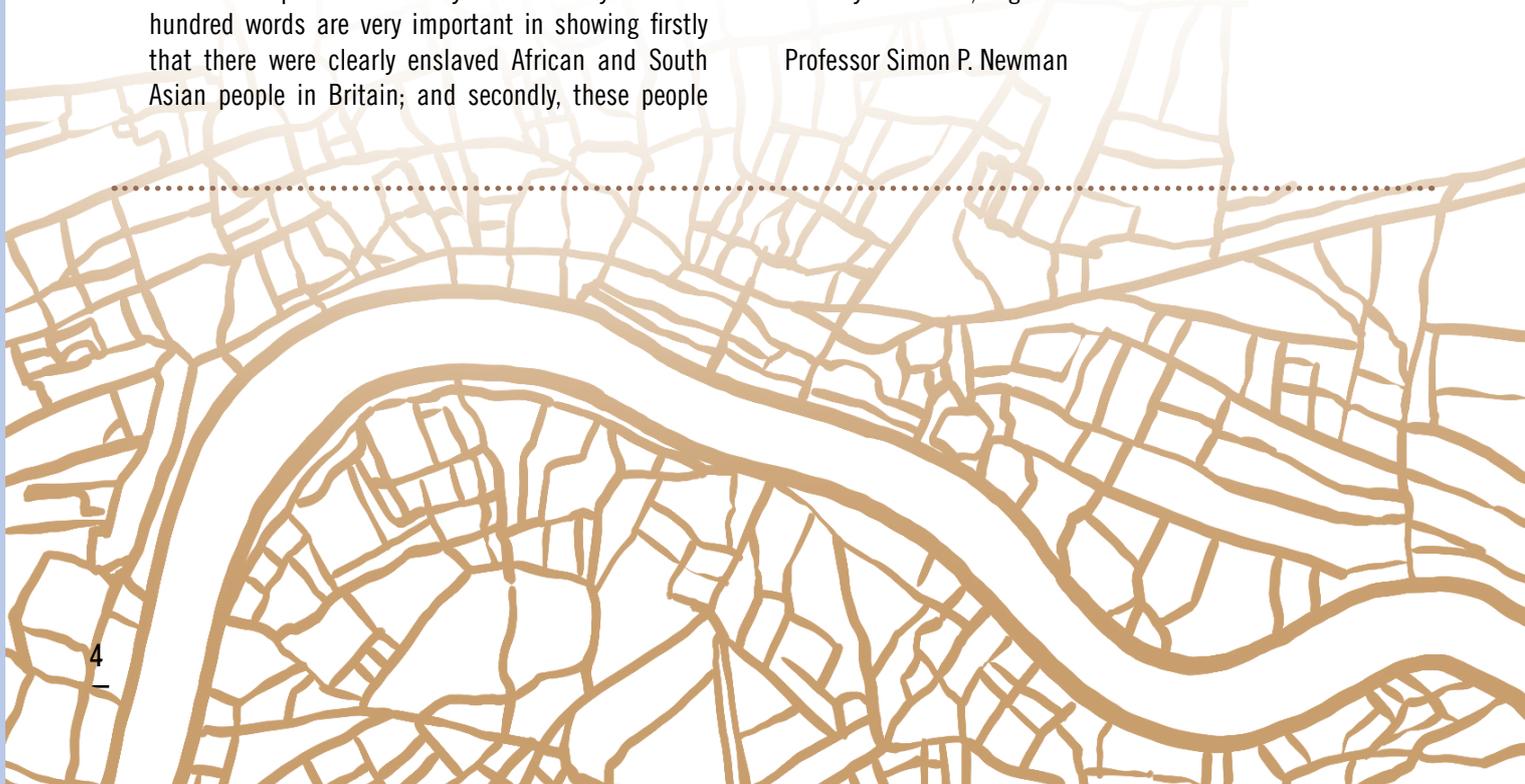
Without portraits or diaries, one of the ways we know about the existence of these enslaved Londoners is through many hundreds of short newspaper advertisements placed in newspapers by masters and enslavers who described and offered rewards for the capture and return of enslaved people who had escaped. 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 Man named Deago, run away the 4th Instant from his Master Capt. Benjamin Stowe, Commander of the Ship Charles. Whoever secures the Negro, and gives notice to the said Captain, or to Mr. Crisp at the Carolina Coffee-house in Birchin-lane, London, shall have 5 Guineas, and Charges.

— The London Gazette, 14th April 1701



REIMAGINING 17TH AND 18TH CENTURY RUNAWAYS BY MOMTAZA MEHRI

An investigation of poems, primary sources, creative interpretations and visual prompts to recreate the lives of runaways in 17th and 18th century London



- Discuss the experiences of enslaved Londoners, their arrival in London, their fears and freedoms
- Explore the meaning of runaways advertisements
- Create free writes based on discussions
- Investigate depictions of 17th and 18th century enslaved people
- Create mirror poems in the voice of these characters

INTRODUCTION

London's docklands has long been a hub of international trade, migration, historical and political transformation. The docklands were at the heart of the transatlantic slave trade, providing a route for the movement of goods harvested by enslaved plantation laborers in the Caribbean. For many enslaved people of African and South Asian descent during the 17th and 18th centuries, the docks would have also been the first glimpses of England.

This was an area teeming with life, full of dock workers, sailors, stowaways, traders, apprentices, artisans, and servants. At the height of the British Empire, this was one of the busiest ports in the world. London's growing Black populations were a visible part of this dynamic, ever-changing community. Such a setting would be an ideal location for a runaway to disappear into.

'BANKSIDE, BREAKING' AND 'BANKSIDE, BEFORE'



Read the poems 'Bankside, Breaking' and 'Bankside, Before' with your students. Could these poems be in conversation with each other, perhaps even sharing a protagonist? Ask the class to discuss in pairs and share their thoughts.

Share a clip from Paul Robeson's musical *Song of Freedom* (1936) (bit.ly/3oA7rAM) a film depicting the diverse makeup of docklands life.

Consider the River Thames as an entry point into an entirely new world for many of those who arrived at its banks. Discuss what it might have been like to arrive in this location for the first time.

FREE WRITING



Ask your students to use their five senses to imagine the bustling scenes of docklands life. Think of the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and sensations which must have bombarded new arrivals.

Get the class to list these as a free write, writing continuously without stopping to edit or correct so that they generate as many ideas as possible.

You can also share the following images as inspiration:

- *Imports from France* by Louis Philippe Boitard, 1757 — bit.ly/3FdN5Dz
- *May Morning* by John Collet, 1761-70 — bit.ly/3mqUNS7

RUNAWAYS

Little is known about the lives of runaways after a successful escape. What we do know is often filtered through the historical record of runaway advertisements placed in newspapers by enslavers offering rewards for the capture of these individuals.

Hundreds of such advertisements appeared in London newspapers, often alongside notices for missing livestock and everyday goods. The age, gender, height, weight, physical characteristics, languages spoken, and notable skills of a runaway were detailed, as well as any other distinctive identifies (like scars or engraved collars).

Runaways of all ages risked severe punishment if caught as well as destitution on London's streets. Some even faced the threat of being sent to the Caribbean's infamously brutal plantations by their enraged masters.

Read the following advertisement for 15-year-old Pompey, who was forced to work as a personal attendant for the wealthy merchant Mr. Stevens.



'RUN away from his Master the 14th instant, Pompey a Black Boy about 15 years of Age, he had on a sad colour'd Frock, a blue Wastcoat and blue Stockings, with a brass Collar about his neck, without Cap or Hat. Whosoever secured him and brings him to his Maser Mr. William Stevens a Merchant in East-lane on Rotherheth-Wall; or to Mr. Howard's the crown Coffee-House behind the Royal Exchange, shall have Twenty Shillings Reward.'

Daily Courant, 22 May 1703

These notices appeared alongside other advertisements, letting readers know about items for sale. As a class discuss why the prevalence of such advertisements was so normalised. Discuss the 'genre' of runaways advertisements in relation to other advertisements.

Leading on from this activity, assign the class into pairs. Refer back to the discussions about London's docks, as well as the runaways advertisements. Ask the pairs to use the questions below to extend these discussions and then feedback to the whole group:

How do you define freedom?

What is the opposite of freedom?

What do you think freedom meant to Pompey?

What freedoms do you think runaways like Pompey wanted for themselves?

Do you think the London of Pompey's time was a 'free' place to live?

FREEDOM AND FEAR



Continuing in pairs, ask students to build on the free writing exercise earlier. This time the prompts are: freedoms and fears.

From the perspective of a runaway stepping into London's streets, what awaits them? How could they melt into London's masses, especially when featured in these advertisements? What possible life could they make for themselves?

Ask one student per pair to free write a list of freedoms, whilst the other creates a list of fears.

Free write to generate ideas and then discuss as a pair, before feeding back to the class.

DEPICTIONS OF AFRICAN AND SOUTH ASIAN BRITONS



Show the class the three paintings below:

- *The Children of Edward Holden Cruttenden* by Sir Joshua Reynolds, c.1763 — bit.ly/3liZWMV
- *Elizabeth Murray, Lady Tollemache, later Countess of Dysart and Duchess of Lauderdale (1626-1698 and an Attendant* by Sir Peter Lely, c.1651 — bit.ly/2YIIIf
- *An Unknown Man, perhaps Charles Goring of Wiston (1744-1829), out Shooting with his Servant* by unknown artist (previously attributed to Johann Zoffany), c.1765 — bit.ly/3A77tSY

Discuss the trio of paintings, including the similarities and differences in poses, framing, positions and depicted actions. What do these staged 'portraits' tell us about the use of enslaved domestic servants and attendants as status symbols and markers of sophisticated wealth?

MIRROR POEM



Ask the class to use the building blocks of their two free writes to construct a poem that attempts to portray the personalities and inner lives of these enslaved people. Note: They can use ideas from their partners lists from the second free write.

Choose a figure from one of these portraits. Give them the brush. Think of all the struggles and stories of runaways discussed previously in the session. A mirror poem is a reflection of the narrator as they see themselves. What would they say if they had the chance to represent themselves?

RESOURCES

A lusty Negro Man named Johnno, speaks broken English, but pretty good French, short Negro Hair, wears a Cinnamon or light-colour Stuff Coat, commonly has a Violin with him, Run away from his Master the 18th of April last. Whoever secures him, or gives Advice of the same, to Capt. Tho. Jeffers at the Sun Coffee-house behind the Royal Exchange, London, so that his Master may have him again, shall receive as a Reward 10 s. and reasonable Charges.

— Daily Courant, 2 May 1713

BANKSIDE, BREAKING

BY MOMTAZA MEHRI

more sorrow, less shame
more talk of the River that wash out my name
— Derek Walcott, 'Dread Song'

River Lea issues forth. A swelling lament. I forgive myself for what others have done. Limehouse, your workers burn like your kilns. I hide my open face from both. Lungfuls of docklands smoke besiege the chest. Sulphur lines the throat's walls. 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. The ever-mushrooming city opens its slack jaws. Swallows its driftless dreamers whole. I disappear into its mouth and call this a beginning. Harbinger of private catastrophes, I bow my cap to you. We stand alongside each other, this river and I. As ever. Shamefully aware of how little we know of each other. Gut pulls at memoried knot, at the thread of a yet forgotten crisp morning. The day I first spotted a cormorant's inky glide across the port, I looked up at the sky, at the boundless flock above, and knew what banishment meant. We are a remembering people.

We have no other choice.

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BANKSIDE, BEFORE

BY MOMTAZA MEHRI

*What better place than this then could we find,
By this sweet stream that knows not of the sea,
That guesses not the city's misery*
— William Morris, 'June'

Once, I was the hull of an empty belly, the belly of an empty hull. Sweat-drenched atrophy. Alone in fevered visions of Akan hands massaging blossom oil into Akan scalps. Flinching at the desertion of touch, I listened to the sound of another boy's murmured distress. He sounded like me, though I couldn't be sure. I sounded like me, though I couldn't be sure. Bruised flesh keeps its inventory of histories, of tactile trails. Reversed. Reverberating. Alone, for what seemed like an unfurling eternity of starless night. The sea owes no allegiances. Elders made their absence known in their proverbs. Below, the bilges groaned like birthing women. Water lapped against time's blunted procession. I sat without speech, as I sat so often, if given the chance, in the brocaded smoking rooms of reclining gentlemen. Before, I knew only of the cloaked fog behind eyelids. Capture swells the vocabulary of abyss. The darkness of the hold. The hold of the darkness. I conversed with a candle's torturous drip. Wordless, I mouthed a shattered count. Onyame! Your son begged. Still awaiting an opening of forked favour. Oracular spirit! Steady these young, hapless feet. Rain-giver, shower us with your sodden blessings. Encircle me with the crush of hailstones, the battering rams of wind & thunder. Tug at your moon. Scrape the tide back from its regular horizons. Don't leave me to my own devices, to their unutterable vices. Help me bear their language of the lash, their lip of horsetail whip. The graveyard floats. There are lessons in the duplicity of waves. I held my tongue. I held onto my tongue.

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ABOUT THE ARTIST: MOMTAZA MEHRI

Momtaza Mehri is a poet and essayist. Her work has appeared in the likes of *Granta*, *Artforum*, *The Guardian*, *BOMB Magazine*, and *The Poetry Review*. She is the former Young People's Laureate for London and columnist-in-residence at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's Open Space, as well as a Frontier-Antioch Fellow at Antioch University.

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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