

Slavery and Freedom in Atlantic Canada's African Diaspora: Introduction

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[See table of contents](#)

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FORUM

Slavery and Freedom in Atlantic Canada's African Diaspora: Introduction

THIS FORUM – “Slavery and Freedom in Atlantic Canada's African Diaspora” – came about as the result of four papers presented in a session at the 20th Atlantic Canada Studies Conference held at the University of New Brunswick, Saint John, in May 2012. Racial discrimination was widespread throughout Atlantic Canada during the 18th century because slavery was based on race and skin colour and therefore only black and Aboriginal people could be enslaved. The racism that emerged in Atlantic Canada had a long gestation and cultural context. Racial attitudes prevalent in France from medieval times to the end of the Enlightenment dictated that dark skin was not only unpleasing but could even denote some “inner depravity.”¹ Other European nations reacted in a similar fashion: Africans were thought to be inferior. Englishmen looked unfavourably on the slaves' blackness, as well as their supposed heathenism and sexual potency. The French, British, and Portuguese branded their slaves with a hot iron on the shoulder, the stomach, or the fat part of the arm, much like cattle or sheep.² Given such a background, enslaved people in Atlantic Canada were inherently outsiders in the Eurocentric society that emerged in the region. As for Nova Scotia, “slaves and free blacks were regularly reminded that they belonged on the lowest level of society, or indeed outside of society altogether.”³ Social identity, part of the customs and traditions of any society, was one of the ways peoples grouped “themselves beyond the confines of their extended kin or family.”⁴ For Europeans, whether in Atlantic Canada, Jamaica, or Brazil, insiders were people raised as European, and it was only when Europeans

- 1 William Cohen, *The French Encounter with Africans: White Response to Blacks, 1530-1880* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1980), 14. Much has been written about “race” in France and the Atlantic World. See Pierre Boule, *Race et esclavage dans la France de l'Ancien Régime* (Paris : Perrin, 2007); Sue Peabody, “There Are No Slaves in France”: *The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Guillaume Aubert, “‘The Blood of France’: Race and Purity of Blood in the French Atlantic World,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser., 61, no. 3 (2004): 439-78; John D. Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Frédéric Régent, *Esclavage, métissage, liberté : La Révolution française en Guadeloupe, 1789-1802* (Paris : Grasset, 2004); Sue Peabody, “‘A Nation Born to Slavery’: Missionaries and Racial Discourse in Seventeenth-Century French Antilles,” *Journal of Social History* 38, no. 1 (Autumn 2004): 113-26; and Mark M. Smith, *How Race is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).
- 2 See Robert Harms, *The Diligent: A Voyage Through the Worlds of the Slave Trade* (New York: Random House, 2002), 249-50, and James A. Rawley, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A History* (New York and London: WW Norton, 1981), 13.
- 3 Harvey Amani Whitfield, “The Struggle over Slavery in the Maritime Colonies,” *Acadiensis* XLI, no. 2 (Summer/Autumn 2012): 27.
- 4 David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 234-5.

Ken Donovan, “Slavery and Freedom in Atlantic Canada's African Diaspora: Introduction,” *Acadiensis* XLIII, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2014): 109-115.

and Africans lived together in the Americas that they tended to highlight characteristics that separated Europeans from Africans.

Unlike their Caucasian contemporaries, most African Canadians know about slavery. “No one knew slavery better than the slave,” wrote historian Ira Berlin, “and few had thought harder about what freedom could mean.”⁵ The study of slavery, however, is not a significant part of the Canadian historical narrative. Despite the efforts of many artists, novelists, and historians, slavery is still not thought by most Canadians to be an integral part of their collective experience. A large part of the reason for this is the entrenchment of the liberal principle of the development of individual or human rights that emerged throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, which has taken full root in much of the western world, and Canada is no exception to this trend. Perhaps more important, the country also takes great pride in being a multicultural nation that welcomes people of all races and creeds. The adoption of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in the 1982 Canadian constitution has reinforced the commitment to human rights, and Canada had opened its borders to refugees from all over the world. Offering safe haven to refugees has a long history in the territory that became Canada, especially since fugitive slaves came to the country from the United States after the end of the War of Independence, after the end of the War of 1812, and as part of the Underground Railroad later in the 19th century. Given this history of providing asylum to slaves and other refugees – and the emphasis within Canada on individual rights – the study of slavery in Canada goes against the dominant image of Canada as a land of freedom. Yet there were slaves in the territory that became New France/Quebec, at least 4,000 between 1685 and 1800.⁶ Recent scholarship estimates that there were another 4,000 slaves in Canada after the French regime. Much but not all of that increase in slave numbers came from mainland Nova Scotia, Cape Breton, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland.⁷

Slavery was introduced into Nova Scotia by the British after the fall of Port Royal (Annapolis Royal) in 1710, and grew after the founding of Halifax in 1749. More slaves came with the immigration of the New England Planters in 1759-1762 and the Loyalist migration of 1783-1784, so that there were at least 2,000 slaves throughout mainland Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. In addition, there were 418 slaves in Cape Breton from 1713 to 1815.⁸

5 Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

6 Kenneth J. Banks, *Chasing the Empire Across the Sea: Communications and the State in the French Atlantic, 1713-1763* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 140.

7 Harvey Amani Whitfield, *Blacks on the Border: The Black Refugees in British North America, 1815-1860* (Burlington, VT: University of Vermont Press, 2006), 9-24; Harvey Amani Whitfield and Barry Cahill, “Slave Life and Slave Law in Colonial Prince Edward Island, 1769-1825,” *Acadiensis* XXXVIII, no. 2 (Summer/Autumn 2009): 29-51; Harvey Amani Whitfield, “The American Background of Loyalist Slaves,” *Left History* 14, no. 1 (Autumn 2009): 58-87; Barry Cahill, “The Black Loyalist Myth in Atlantic Canada,” *Acadiensis* XXIX, no. 1 (Autumn 1999): 76-87; Ken Donovan, “Slaves in Cape Breton, 1713-1815,” *Directions: Canadian Race Relations Foundation* 4, no. 1 (Summer 2007): 44-5. I have been able to identify 418 enslaved persons in Cape Breton from 1713 to 1815.

8 See T. Watson Smith, “The Slave in Canada,” *Collections of the Nova Scotia Historical Society* 10 (1899): 2-161; Barry Cahill, “Slavery and the Judges of Loyalist Nova Scotia,” *University of*

During the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783), black slaves in the American colonies were offered refuge by the British if they left their rebel owners.⁹ Some 3,550 black people eventually emigrated from the American colonies to Nova Scotia. Loyalists who emigrated to Nova Scotia also took their slaves so that – according to one list – 1,232 black people, or 34 per cent of the total black emigrants, remained slaves in Nova Scotia.¹⁰ This number is too low, however, since it does not include the slaves brought to Shelburne.¹¹ The Shelburne (Birchtown) muster included another 1,269 people, most likely black, who were described as “servants” and composed of 823 men, 289 women, and 157 children.¹² The word “servant” – usually a euphemism for slave – has been widely discussed in the historical literature. Slave owners generally preferred the less offensive descriptions of servant, negro, black and a variety of other terms to the word slave, reflecting a reluctance and perhaps a slight embarrassment to call a slave a slave.¹³

During the late 18th century practically every county in mainland Nova Scotia had slaves, and this story remains to be told.¹⁴ “Black Loyalist historiography,” Harvey Amani Whitfield rightly observes, “has consistently overlooked those who remained enslaved.”¹⁵ Ironically, slavery was expanded in Nova Scotia after the American Revolution; the increase of black freedom in Nova Scotia had gone hand-in-hand with the increase of slavery.¹⁶ By the mid-19th century there were approximately 4,900 people of African descent in Nova Scotia. This was the largest

New Brunswick Law Journal 43 (1994): 73-127; Barry Cahill, “Habeas Corpus and Slavery in Nova Scotia: *R. v. Hecht, ex parte Rachel*, 1798,” *University of New Brunswick Law Journal* 44 (1995): 179-209; and Barry Cahill, “The ‘Reception’ of Slavery in Pre-Loyalist Nova Scotia: History and Historiography” (paper presented at Atlantic Canada Studies Workshop, St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, NS, 25 August 2001).

9 For the latest work on this topic, see Ruth Holmes Whitehead, *Black Loyalists: Southern Settlers of Nova Scotia's First Free Black Community* (Halifax: Nimbus, 2013).

10 “Return of the disbanded troops and Loyalists settling in the Province of Nova Scotia, mustered in the summer of 1784,” of Robert Morse. This return noted 1,232 “servants” but it did not list racial identity. Moreover, Shelburne was not a part of the list: “However, the few histories about slavery in Maritime Canada generally agree that the blacks listed as servants were, in fact, probably slaves.” See Whitfield, “Black Loyalists and Black Slaves in Maritime Canada,” *History Compass* 5, no. 6 (November 2001): 1990 (n5).

11 Whitfield, *Blacks on the Border*, 130 (n42).

12 Whitehead, *Black Loyalists*, 160 (see n3).

13 See, for example, Frank Mackey, *Done with Slavery: The Black Fact in Montreal, 1760-1840* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2010), 81, 117, 184; Peter A. Dorsey, *Common Bondage Slavery as Metaphor in Revolutionary America* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee, 2009), 161; Douglas H. Johnson, “Sudanese Military Slavery from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Century,” in *Slavery and other Forms of Unfree Labour*, ed. Léonie J. Archer (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 150; and Donald B. Gibson, “Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass and the Slavery Debate: Bondage, Family and the Discourse of Domesticity,” in *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: New Critical Essays*, ed. Deborah M. Garfield and Rafia Zafar (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 157.

14 Ken Donovan, “Slavery,” in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History*, ed. Gerald Hallowell (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2004), 585.

15 Harvey Amani Whitfield, “Black Loyalists and Black Slaves,” 1981.

16 Whitfield, *Blacks on the Border*, 21.

number of African-American inhabitants in the Atlantic region of British North America and New England after Massachusetts and Connecticut.

In a recent essay entitled “The Struggle Over Slavery in the Maritime Colonies,” Whitfield argues that more investigation of slavery in the Maritimes is required in order to find out about the enslaved people, their origins, their occupations, the role of female slaves, owner/slave relations, and the classes of the slaveholders. The historiography of slavery in Canada is still sparse, and “lacks the basic overviews that allowed scholars of American slavery to pursue complicated topics. . . . As a result, the study of regional slavery is an exercise in documenting the essential contours of the institution before we can initiate more nuanced investigations.”¹⁷

The four papers that follow, summaries of larger works, begin to address this call for more study of slavery in the region. While my own contribution is historical in nature, the other three papers – by Mary Louise McCarthy, Catherine Cottreau-Robbins, and Heather MacLeod-Leslie – bring the perspectives of race relations, women’s studies, and historical archaeology, among others, to the research of slavery in the Maritimes. Their chosen fields of study are all multidisciplinary.

The first paper, by Mary Louise McCarthy and entitled “Mixed Race Identity Black and Maliseet: My Personal Narrative,” offers a personal view of life from the perspective of a mixed-race identity. In this paper McCarthy takes a courageous stand and offers the view from a woman of African descent growing up in white, rural New Brunswick. McCarthy notes that her Aboriginal heritage (Maliseet and Iroquois) and her Chinese identity were “hidden” within her own family (117). As a seventh-generation descendant of the African Diaspora to Atlantic Canada, she describes how her family’s story was on the periphery because of colonialism and racism. People of African descent in Canada have always struggled to find a voice, a compass point, in the broader narrative of Canadian history. “I wanted,” McCarthy emphasizes, “to be a vehicle for my ancestors to tell their stories” (120). McCarthy developed the resolve and acquired the higher education, skills, and confidence to enable her to speak from the perspective of a racial minority: “I became slowly aware of my ancestors’ voices and felt compelled to learn more. I was also feeling deeply frustrated by the lack of public awareness of my ancestors’ lives and their experiences and their subsequent contribution to my province” (117).

Mary Louise McCarthy’s description of her experiences growing up in New Brunswick has striking affinities with filmmaker Sylvia Hamilton recounting her early years in Nova Scotia. Hamilton also noted that people of African descent were not present in any of her school texts at the elementary, high school, or university levels: “I sat in classes never learning about people who looked like my family, my friends, my relatives. You know you exist, your body is evidence, but nothing of you exists in this wider world.”¹⁸ As I read and contemplated the work of Mary Louise McCarthy – as I had Sylvia Hamilton’s earlier work – I recalled some of Edward Said’s thoughts on culture and imperialism. Students and teachers of non-European literatures, he reminds us, must be aware of the politics of what they study. The

17 Whitfield, “The Struggle over Slavery,” 19.

18 Sylvia D. Hamilton, “When and Where I Enter: History, Film, and Memory,” *Acadiensis* XLI, no. 2 (Summer/Autumn 2012): 5.

topics of slavery, colonialism, and racism in post-colonial societies have too often been confined to the margins, relegated to secondary positions in the curricula. Moreover, “domination and inequities of power and wealth are perennial facts of human society. But in today’s global settings they are also interpretable as having something to do with imperialism, its history, its new forms.”¹⁹ Said’s understanding of historical and contemporary literature provides a framework within which to better appreciate McCarthy’s and Hamilton’s perspectives. Historians often interpret the past as if it were a dead reality, having little to do with present-day life. There are many people, however, in Atlantic Canada and beyond for whom the origins and persistence of racism represent a daily reality and who thus do not have the luxury of taking a detached view of this element of the past.

The second and third contributions in the forum are by two recent PhD graduates in archaeology. Catherine Cottreau-Robins and Heather MacLeod-Leslie provide new insights for the study of slavery in Nova Scotia through their archaeological investigations. Since the overwhelming majority of slaves were illiterate, they left few narratives or written records of their identity. Archaeology provides an open window on slave life and much potential for further investigation of how slaves lived in Nova Scotia. Through extensive fieldwork, Cottreau-Robins has developed an interdisciplinary approach and methodology that examines “the people, places and culture that formed the Loyalist plantation” (125). Employing the investigative, scientific techniques of modern archaeology, she examines the artifacts of everyday slave life while also calling upon other disciplines such as architecture and cultural geography to explore the architectural remains and landscape features. Within this framework, Cottreau-Robins compares two 18th-century plantation landscapes: Timothy Ruggles’s estate in Hardwick, Worcester County, Massachusetts, and his farmstead on North Mountain, Wilmot Township, Annapolis County, Nova Scotia.

Cottreau-Robins’s paper, “Searching for the Enslaved in Nova Scotia’s Loyalist Landscape,” demonstrates the need for patience and long-term perspectives in scholarly study because there was, of course, much more information on the slave holders such as Timothy Ruggles and his family than on the slaves. The study of the lives of the slaves is much like looking through the wrong end of a telescope. As the evidence is gathered, however, the telescope is turned around and the image becomes larger and clearer. Cottreau-Robins’s search for the enslaved proved fruitful since there were at least five slaves eventually on the Ruggles farmstead on North Mountain in 1883: Hester Ruggles (age 7), Jeffrey Ruggles (age 6), Prince (age 19), Robert Williams (age 23), and John Coslin (age 25 and a mulatto). Williams and Coslin were both described as free-born, but this designation has to be treated with skepticism because numerous “free” slaves were re-enslaved in Loyalist Nova Scotia and New Brunswick.²⁰ Moreover, there was a shifting and flimsy line between slavery and freedom for people of African descent in the Maritimes and that was especially the case for small children. Children who had become separated from their parents were particularly vulnerable because they had no guardians to protect

19 Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 19.

20 Whitfield, “The Struggle over Slavery,” 21, 27, 32-5; Carole Watterson Troxler, “Re-enslavement of Black Loyalists: Mary Postell in South Carolina, East Florida, and Nova Scotia,” *Acadiensis* XXXVII, no. 2 (Summer/Autumn 2008); Whitehead, *Black Loyalists*, 161-6.

them from re-enslavement by their alleged white owners.²¹ Cottreau-Robins eventually excavated what were likely the slave-quarters on the Ruggles property, a small hut with a “dry-laid stone foundation, possible earthen floor, clapboard construction, sparse window glass, small size, and location close to the fields but visible from the main house” (130). There were 166 artifacts out of a total of 279 in the hut that date to the late 18th century but no particular African features were recorded among the artifacts, at least in comparison to American researchers excavating similar slave quarters in the United States. More fieldwork is required, but the evidence confirms that the slave-holding family developed a landscape that “reinforced a hierarchal arrangement constructed by Ruggles with his mansion house at the top and others on the land or in the quarter below” (135).

Heather MacLeod-Leslie’s paper, “Archaeology and Atlantic Canada’s African diaspora,” serves as a most appropriate complement to Cottreau-Robbins’s contribution because they both offer sophisticated archaeological perspectives on Atlantic Canada’s African Diaspora. MacLeod-Leslie’s work focused on excavations from three African-Nova Scotian communities: Birchtown, Shelburne County; Delap’s Cove, Annapolis County; and Rear Monastery, between Antigonish and Guysborough counties. The fourth excavation, Coote Cove, near Halifax, was a late-18th-century Irish community and it was selected to counterbalance “the inclination to rely too heavily on ethnicity-based explanations when the explanation may derive rather from economic or social position” (140). MacLeod-Leslie used an Africentric interpretative perspective in her “analysis of the objects, their immediate contexts, and the cultural landscapes in which those contexts were understood” (138).

Drawing upon African diaspora archaeology conducted outside of Atlantic Canada, MacLeod-Leslie looked for specific material cultural items in certain locations that were characteristic of African diasporic cultural behaviours in other landscapes. Some of these specific cultural objects included crystal glass, pierced coins, blue beads, marine shells, pipes and objects with “X”s marked on them, various types of handles from utensils, copper-alloy objects, bones, cutlery, white saucers or fragments of them, nails, iron, white chalk, and similar material. These items, usually found in the northeast corner of rooms or in various structures, were often hidden in the walls as they were built or renovated. The objects had special powers because they could be used to conjure or invoke spiritual powers, and they only make scholarly sense when interpreted from an Africentric perspective.

In the same manner, MacLeod-Leslie also calls upon Parks Canada to interpret the archaeological evidence excavated at Louisbourg from an Africentric perspective because there had been more than 300 slaves living in the town. Louisbourg has the largest collection of artifacts in the world for an 18th century town – more than 5.5 million – so there is great potential for future investigation and interpretation. Moreover, there were at least two houses that were occupied by slaves. François, the executioner, and his wife had a small vertical-log house at the rear of the town. Jean Baptiste Cupidon, a slave who obtained his freedom and

21 Whitfield, “The Struggle over Slavery,” 35.

purchased his wife Catherine's freedom, also had a small vertical-log house near the Royal Battery.²²

Finally, my own paper – “Female Slaves as Sexual Victims in Île Royale” – examines how enslaved women were sexually exploited by their white slave owners. Slavery relied on force, and thus any history of slavery must include a discussion of power, violence, and forced labour. The relationship between master and slave was inherently one-sided, especially when it involved white male owners and black female slaves. On Île Royale there were 70 adult female slaves, who were vulnerable to sexual exploitation by their owners. As many as 36 of the 70 women slaves gave birth to a total of 48 illegitimate children. To name the young enslaved mothers and their children provides powerful evidence of the brutal sexual exploitation of female slaves in Louisbourg and in the outport communities of Île Royale. Even so, the slaves of Île Royale refused to surrender their humanity, refused to give in to despair, and refused to give up hope for a better life. Enslaved women also had the potential to use sex in a strategic sense and thereby gain benefits for their children and themselves. Moreover, their languages and African religious practices, together with their music, dance, and general cultural background, formed a vital part of their identity and played a key role in their resistance to white oppression. Talented individuals, the enslaved people had multiple life skills as mothers, caregivers, cooks, entrepreneurs, fishermen, courageous defenders, wood cutters, gardeners, seamstresses, musicians, makers of soap, and preserves. Slaves in Île Royale, like slaves everywhere, were not merely identified by their enslavement.

These four papers are similar because they deal with some aspect of slavery and freedom in the African diaspora of the Atlantic region. And yet, at the same time, the papers are all different. Mary Louise McCarthy presents a personal view of life from the background of a mixed-race identity. Her introspective paper concentrates primarily on the implications of slavery and race within a New Brunswick historical context down to the present-day within her own family. For their part, Catherine Cottreau-Robins and Heather MacLeod-Leslie examine people of African descent from an archaeological perspective; but each adopts a different approach and research methodology. Cottreau-Robins focuses on the slaves from one property in Annapolis County whereas MacLeod-Leslie provides a broader outlook by examining the living conditions of people of African descent at the archaeological sites of Birchtown, Delap's Cove, and Rear Monastery in Nova Scotia. Finally, my own paper is strictly historical as it relies on documentary evidence from 18th-century Cape Breton. The forum demonstrates the wide variety of approaches and the great potential that different disciplines offer for the further study of slavery and freedom in Atlantic Canada's African Diaspora.

KEN DONOVAN

22 Ken Donovan, “Slaves and Their Owners in Ile Royale, 1713-1760,” *Acadiensis* XXV, no. 1 (Autumn 1995): 3-32.

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