

Remembering Montreal as a Site of Transatlantic Slavery

Charmaine A. Nelson

Having lived in Montreal for many years, I often visited the historic neighbourhood of Old Montreal. As a scholar who studies Transatlantic Slavery, I found it to be full of ghosts. Old Montreal *was* Montreal at one time; the part of the city that was first settled by the French starting in the sixteenth century. In 1688 the colonial administrator Jean-Baptiste de Lagny (Sieur des Bringandières) petitioned the governor, Jacques-René de Brisay (Marquis de Denonville), to appeal to France for slaves.¹ Already established trade routes between New France and several French-held Caribbean islands were cited as evidence of the feasibility of transportation. By the early eighteenth century, slavery continued to grow slowly to service the demand for domestics and field hands of the wealthier classes.² By 1663, an aggressive new era of colony-building had ensued under King Louis XIV. Although hesitant about the ability of Africans to survive in the Canadian winters, the King was persuaded when local politicians extolled the success of slavery in New England as indicative of the resilience and adaptability of the African population. He gave his assent on 1 May 1689.³ Slavery in New France included the enslavement of people of African and Indigenous descent, a practice that the British continued after conquest with the renaming of the region as Quebec.

Transatlantic Slavery transpired over the course of 400 years from the 1400's to the 1800's. The standard focus on the tropical or semi-tropical regions, has resulted in a fixation on mono-crop plantation economies where year-round agriculture resulted in the cultivation and exportation of crops like coffee, cotton, and sugar cane. Bound up with the processes of empire building, together the European nations of Britain, Denmark/Norway, France, Portugal, Spain, and The Netherlands, seized inhabited Indigenous lands across the Americas and expropriated an estimated 21 million people from Africa, an estimated 7 million of whom died on the marches

from the interior to the west Africa coast. Another approximately 2 million died from disease, illness, violence, and suicide during the transatlantic ship voyages known as the Middle Passage. Finally, an estimated 12 million survived the crossing and were primarily scattered across the Americas (from Argentina to Canada including the Caribbean) as the slave labour for Europe's imperial programs of resource extraction and capitalist wealth production.

Race as a supposedly biological marker of human difference was produced in and through the process of colonization and slavery, and uniquely, it was black Africans who were universally deemed to be "enslavable". Besides the race-based nature of Transatlantic Slavery, it was also distinct from other more historical forms of slavery due to its matrilineal organization which ensured that enslaved females gave birth to children who became the property of their slave owners. This structure served to incentivize rape, sexual coercion, and predation, by "rewarding" slave owners with new "units of labour" when enslaved females gave birth. The oversaturation of research and popular cultural interest on tropical regions has led to a misrepresentation of cold-climate, slave-minority sites which are often erroneously misunderstood as milder and gentler in terms of the use of corporal punishment and the overall suffering of the enslaved.

Nations like Canada, Argentina, Denmark/Norway, and Scotland are often overlooked and understudied within the field of Transatlantic Slavery Studies for two key reasons: 1) their temperate climates with drastic seasonal changes and harsh winters meant that they could not sustain plantation economies, and connectedly (2) the climate and nature of the labour demands resulted in slave minority populations, ones in which the enslaved African populations were often significantly outnumbered by the white settlers and Indigenous populations.

This *Slavery Tour of Montreal* (which includes one site in Quebec City) has been prepared by some of the dedicated and passionate students who completed my fourth year seminar: James McGill was Slave Owner: Slavery and the History of Universities during my last semester working at McGill University (Montreal) in the winter of 2020. It is my hope that the tour will allow Canadians and visitors alike to explore and contemplate one of Canada's best kept secrets, its role in the 400 year human tragedy of Transatlantic Slavery.

Introduction: Slavery Tour of Montreal

Chris J. Gismondi

When considering cities whose rich history, culture, and wealth were generated from slavery, we likely think of tropical locales like New Orleans,⁴ Louisiana Charleston, South Carolina, Kingston, Jamaica, Bridgetown, Barbados, Havana, Cuba, and many others. If we ventured north we may think of temperate spaces like Boston, Massachusetts, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the Chesapeake, New York City,⁵ New York or Providence, Rhode Island which were central to the economic backbone of the “African trade” of enslaved humans.⁶ Even European port cities like Bristol, Liverpool, or London,⁷ UK and their Portuguese, French, Netherlandish, and Spanish counterparts owe much of their imperial economic foundation to Transatlantic Slavery, processes of colonialism, and its commodities.⁸

Due to this conflation of Transatlantic Slavery with tropical plantation slavery, the profound ties of many Canadian cities and communities to slavery and black history are absent from public knowledge.⁹ Innovative research aims to fill these lapses like this slavery tour featuring locations throughout Montréal and the province of Québec. This module was researched by McGill students in the art history seminar course “James McGill was a Slave Owner: Slavery and the History of Universities” supervised by Dr. Charmaine A. Nelson in

winter 2020. This slavery tour follows in the footsteps of others like that created by the educator and historian Natasha Henry for a walking tour of downtown Toronto related to slavery in the Upper Canada capital of York, further countering the erasures of Canadian Slavery.¹⁰ These accessible, free, educational walking tours are powerful tools to share cutting edge academic research and experience city spaces from a new and interactive lens. Tours like these—whether they are self-guided or delivered - offer a unique, embodied and emotive way to connect to cultural history, public heritage, urban ruins, and historic architecture.

The space of Montréal is largely unmarked as a slave port with centuries of transatlantic traffic or its foundation upon settler colonialism. It is marked through the struggle between the French and British Empires, remembering one “imperial intrusion” but not others.¹¹ This phrase is what Charmaine A. Nelson understands as the taking and the subsequent representations of spaces with the aim to try to “indigenize” whiteness.¹² Instead, from the vantage point that Europeans were intruders, we “interrogate the very process of colonization by recuperating the original presence of Native bodies and questioning the forced removal and transplantation of Africans as ‘necessary’ supplements for imperial design.”¹³ In the city of Montréal, the entire city was created through these processes of colonialism, imperialism, as well as being directly dependent on domestic and Atlantic networks of slavery. Yet the space today is unrecognizable or commemorated as such. This tour is a humble contribution to the work of re-marking Montréal with these uncomfortable histories.

Locations in this tour range chronologically throughout the long eighteenth century from 1642 to 1833 and 1865, the years of British/Canadian abolition and American emancipation. The locations selected include hospitals and religious orders that kept African descended and

Indigenous peoples enslaved like l'Hôtel-Dieu de Montréal founded by Jeanne-Mance and the Grey Nuns' Hôpital General overseen by Marie-Marguerite d'Youville.

Other locations unearth research to reimagine public spaces in contemporary Vieux Montréal as places of a slaving society, namely Place Royale where slave auctions were held. That square along with Place Vauquelin were also used for public execution, a task so shameful for the white Christian citizens it was reserved for enslaved black people. In Québec City, Montmorency Falls was the suspected destination for Joe, the enslaved printing press operator who fled from his owner William Brown, the owner of the Quebec Gazette newspaper.

Multiple sites are connected to one of the more well-known enslaved people in Canadian history, Marie-Joseph Angélique, like the Francheville House on Rue. St Paul where she was enslaved, Notre Dame Cathedral where she received her last rights before execution, and the home of Pierre Rambault, a slave owning judge who presided over her arson trial.

Other locations focus on the slave owning elite like the grounds of Burnside Estate owned by James McGill, the modern site of the university that bears his name. Other institutions throughout the city reveal this history like the Beaver Club, home to the wealthy social circles of Montréal white male fur traders and slave owners, or the Montreal Gazette headquarters which printed and profited from slave sale and auction advertisements and fugitive/runaway slave advertisements which hunted those escaping slavery. Other ties to slavery and business move outside of Montréal including the site of Hugh Ritchie, a slave owner and tailor in Québec City illuminated through a runaway slave advertisement for Cash and Nemo an enslaved black woman and man.

Some stops bring us into the near history and remind us of the progress that was made towards ending slavery after centuries of strife, advocacy, and resistance. The Montréal

Mechanic Institute was a hotbed for American abolition during the United States' Civil War and prior to that the home of Alexander Grant highlights early black activism in Canada on the eve of British abolition.

In addition to these locations, in previous research I speculated how we should read or implicate Montréal's churches and liturgical material culture into histories of slavery,¹⁴ especially since the French slavery legislation *Le Code Noir* encouraged the baptizing of the enslaved.¹⁵ Scholar Marcel Trudel has revealed that baptisms were routinely performed on the enslaved individual's death bed as salvation for their soul after their body had already been liberated from slavery.¹⁶ Within a Christian settler colony like Québec, religion must be understood as a dominant tool of control and therefore more awareness is needed around the social and religious role of the church and baptism within slavery.¹⁷ The exploitation of baptism as a mechanism of control is revealed in the conflation of the roles of slave owner and God parents, not an atypical occurrence in Québec.¹⁸ Therefore, baptism and other religious ceremonies must be understood as tools for the further "breaking" of the enslaved, both psychologically and culturally (away from their Africanness or indigeneity), thereby subordinating the enslaved to their life in bondage.¹⁹ Ceremonies like baptism or marriage were otherwise not freely extended onto the enslaved population, but strategically withheld or hypocritically and selectively deployed.

Throughout Transatlantic slavery, the enslaved population's access to religious rites differed greatly from the free slaving society.²⁰ In her slave narrative, Mary Prince explains she was baptized twice, once by her own accord as a Moravian practitioner and previously in an "English church" which denied her further access.²¹ She explained, "I wished to attend a Sunday School taught by Mr. Curtin, but he would not receive me without a written note from my

master, granting his permission. I did not ask my owner's permission, from the belief that it would be refused".²² An additional example is demonstrated by slave marriages which similarly required the owners' permission and were not performed by most sects of Christianity. Mary Prince's union to a free black man in Antigua was conducted by the Moravian church on account that no other "English church" on the island would unite them.²³ When her owners discovered the marriage without their permission, Mrs. Wood "stirred up" Mr. Wood to flog Prince with a horse whip concerned her husband would frequent their property.²⁴ Although the Moravian church had united the couple in union, her owners, other denominations, and slave society more broadly would not recognize or respect the marriage. Moreover, while some preachers would twist scripture to uphold slavery, others used religion as a means of anti-slavery like Mary Prince learning to read while attending Moravian church.²⁵ Clearly, the spiritual bonds and religious practices of the enslaved were policed and regulated as much as possible like the tangible material world of these slave societies. Something necessary to consider in French Canada's practices of slavery.

The social, economic, religious, and racial residue of slavery lingers in Montréal and the province of Québec. James McGill's immense land holdings evidenced in his will,²⁶ and other wealth stemmed largely from his direct slave ownership and his brokering of other slave sales, as well as his participation in the colonial economy of the fur trade, and his selling the West Indies commodities like sugar, rum, and molasses.²⁷ While there is much current debate about monuments and which histories we choose to commemorate publicly,²⁸ walking tours offer an alternative for a self-made, community, or grassroots emphasis of place. I see this as similar to how slave narratives alter our perspective of a history which was dominantly written from the perspective of the slave-owning classes.²⁹ More importantly however, these personal testimonies

in the slave narrative genre activate their settings, sites, cities, and regions through an animated history of slavery represented through the eyes of the enslaved. For histories of slavery or colonialism, walking tour models like this are extremely productive to counter hegemonic understandings of history and space as they relate to the cities we inhabit.³⁰

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⁵ Thanks to Lucia Bell-Epstein for showing us this excellent tour resource “Story Map of Runaway Slave Advertisements Submitted by King’s College and Columbia Slaveowning Students and Affiliates (Class of 1760-1805)” Columbia University and Slavery Student Exhibits, (date of last access 1 April 2020) <https://slaveryexhibitsctl.columbia.edu/exhibits/show/runaway-slave-advertisements-s/runaway-slave-advertisements->

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¹² Nelson, Slavery, Geography, and Empire, p. 15.

¹³ Nelson, Slavery, Geography, and Empire, p. 12.

¹⁴ Chris J. Gismondi, "A Slave to God: Subjugation and Controlling the Enslaved Panis and Negros Among the Clergy of New France", (date of last access 12 May 2020) https://www.academia.edu/39866636/A_Slave_to_God_Subjugation_and_Controlling_Enslaved_Panis_and_Negros_Among_the_Clergy_of_New_France.

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¹⁹ "Breaking" was a variety of practices like renaming, corporal punishment, or I argue baptism to discourage resistance, and try to force the enslaved to accept their life in servitude. Patterson details how Frederick Douglass fought back a hired slave-breaker who was trying to subdue him through beating. Orlando Patterson, "The Constituent Elements of Slavery", Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World: A Student Reader, eds. Hilary Beckles, and Verene Shepherd (Kingston: Ian Randle Press, 2000), p. 39.

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