Reconsidering the Underground Railroad: Slavery and Racialization in the Making of the Canadian State[1]

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Résumé

Il est traditionnel de voir dans le chemin de fer clandestin des esclaves un point pivot de l'idéologie de l'État canadien en ce qui concerne une tradition de racisme et d'antiracisme. Le présent article s'efforce de présenter le récit du chemin de fer clandestin sous un autre angle : celui d'une économie anti-impérialiste et antiraciste, plutôt que celui d'un Canada antiraciste se portant au secours des esclaves fugitifs de l'Amérique raciste. En fait, le chemin de fer clandestin est avant tout dû aux efforts d'auto-émancipation des esclaves noirs américains. Il est essentiel de reconnaître et de rétablir leur rôle central comme agents de leur propre lutte pour la liberté, point de départ théorique et historique d'une explication de la préhistoire de la confédération. Si les colonies britanniques de l'Amérique du Nord offrent un havre aux esclaves fugitifs, c'est par *realpolitik;* l'aube de l'État canadien est en fait imprégnée d'hégémonie culturelle blanche et de racisme. L'analyse s'inscrit dans le contexte des discussions actuelles et passées de l'antiracisme et de l'anti-impérialisme.

Abstract

The Underground Railroad is commonly understood as a defining moment in the ideology of the Canadian state regarding the legacy of racism and anti-racism. This paper attempts to recast the narrative of the Underground Railroad through the lens of an anti-imperialist, anti-racist political economy, departing from the view of Canada's anti-racist rescue of fugitive slaves from racist America. The Underground Railroad was in fact the product primarily of the struggle for self-emancipation of American black slaves. The central place of these actors as agents of their own freedom struggle needs to be recognized and restored, taken as a theoretical and historical starting point in explaining the pre-history of Confederation. The British North American colonies served as a safe space for fugitive slaves as a result of *realpolitik;* racism and a culture of hegemonic whiteness were endemic to the early origins of the Canadian state. This analysis is placed in the context of current and historical discussions of anti-racism and anti-imperialism.

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Introduction

The Underground Railroad is commonly understood as a defining moment in the making of the Canadian state. As Afua Cooper summarizes:

> *In the story of North American slavery, we associate Canada with 'freedom' or 'refuge,' because during the nineteenth century, especially between 1830 and 1860, the period known as the Underground Railroad era, thousands of American runaway slaves escaped to and found refuge in the British territories to the north. Therefore, the image of Canada as 'freedom's land' has lodged itself in the national psyche and become part of our national identity (2006: 69).*

In the popular understanding and retelling of the Underground Railroad story, Canada is presumed in its origins and early history as a nation consistent with modern notions of inclusiveness and multiculturalism. As Katherine McKittrick puts the case: "[T]he Underground Railroad continually historicizes a national self-image that obscures racism and colonialism through its ceaseless promotion of Canadian helpfulness, generosity, and adorable impartiality" (2007: 98-99).

The argument developed here attempts to recast the narrative of the Underground Railroad through the lens of an anti-imperialist, anti-racist political economy. This analysis departs from the view commonly accepted in mainstream and some critical discourses, that the Underground Railroad represents a moment of Canadian anti-racist, or non-racist, rescue from racist America. This analysis further challenges the absenting of black and racialized actors, as subjects, citizens and/or waged or slave labourers, from the ideological construction of 'Canadian' society (Thobani, 2007; Cooper, 2006; McKittrick, 2006; Razack, 2002). George Elliot Clarke summarizes:

> *The avoidance of Canada's sorry history of slavery and racism is natural….Key to this propaganda – and that is what it is – is the Manichean portrayal of two nations: Canada, the land of 'Peace, Order and Good Government', of evolution within the traditional constraints of monarchy and authority, where racism was not and is not tolerated, versus the United States of America, the land of guns, cockroaches, and garbage, of criminal sedition confronted by aggressive policing (and jailing), where racism was and is the arbiter of class (im)mobility. Indeed, in Canada, 'race' and racism are concepts used to re-fight the American Revolution, to establish that the Yankee Revolt against the Crown was wrong, while Canada's loyalty to monarchy, hierarchy, and public order fostered a more harmonious and, ironically, rouge-tinted society. But the price of this flattering self-portrait is public lying, falsified history, and self-destructive blindness (2006: xii).*

Since the time of the American revolution, British colonial policy lured the loyalty of slaves by the promise of freedom. But runaway slaves, who risked their lives and those of their families to escape unspeakable abuse, were treated as pawns in a political game. They were commodities, legal property, and as such a source of great wealth and value to Americans disloyal to the empire. Like stray animals, they were not to be returned to their distraught owners, but neither were they welcomed as genuinely free and equal citizens. In fact, there is evidence that conditions were sufficiently repellent to slaves of colonial North America who accompanied their loyalist masters to Canada that "escapees traversed a reverse Underground Railroad", seeking to return to the Thirteen Colonies (Cooper, 2006: 86). More generally, however, the absence of plantation slavery in Canada has been misread as an indication of Canada's race-neutral history.

Racism is clearly, however, a Canadian-made reality. It is now widely understood that there is no scientific basis to the existence of 'race' (i.e. there are no verifiable biological human characteristics regarding intellect, emotion, or behaviour that serve as correlates to skin pigmentation, dentifrice, hair texture, or other phenotypical traits) (Baum 2006; Alexander 1987). Racism, however, makes claim to such correlates, or to similarly ascribed human characteristics based on 'culture', language, and 'civilization' (Loomba, 2005). Racism, though unfounded scientifically, appears, or 'feels', to be meaningful. It provides an apparently coherent and institutionally supported systemization regarding who is imagined to be included as part of a defined collectivity of citizenship, membership and/or nationhood, and therefore, necessarily, who is also excluded (Balibar, 2002; Bakan, 2008).

The origin of the Canadian state, far from being race-neutral, was marked by a racialized culture of hegemonic whiteness. As divisions among the colonies of the Americas threatened the hegemony of empire, Britain presented its role as not only colonial oppressor, but also as 'protector' of its suffering subjects. The contradictory notion of the British Crown as a 'benevolent despot', one that would not only enable slavery but would also protect free blacks from the plantation owners of the US South and other potential colonialist rebellions in the Caribbean, was central to the ideology of 'loyalism' cultivated among the Canadian nascent bourgeoisie (Bakan, 1990). Such patronizing 'benevolence' was clearly articulated regarding indigenous peoples, albeit to legitimate threatened genocide, in the Royal Proclamation of 1763. The document pronounced that "the several Nations or Tribes of Indians with whom We are connected, and who live under our Protection, should not be molested or disturbed in the Possession of such Parts of Our Dominions and Territories" (Royal Proclamation, 1763).

The benevolent despotism belied another reality. The emergent Canadian bourgeoisie was formed in identification with the British colonial and imperialist system. The emergent

ruling class was eager to secure a defined market for a specifically Canadian capitalist and imperialist accumulation project. They opposed the encroachment of US capitalism not out of altruism, or goodwill to the victims of US expansion, but as capitalist competitors. The British North American colonies served as a safe space for fugitive slaves as a result of *realpolitik*, meaning a pragmatic adjustment of political policies and ideological norms to address immediate conditions, rather than as a feature of developed normative or ethical commitments. One section of the colonial elite rejected the return of runaway slaves as a form of sanction, refusing to return stray 'property' to another section, the rebellious US elite. But there was also strong identification with the southern slave states during the US Civil War (Mayers, 2003; Ryerson, 1983). Any presumption of opposition to racism, or a universal ideological objection to slavery as an institution, in the origins of the Canadian state is misplaced. Canada was formed in 1867 as an expression of and means to advance capitalist competition. Racism and a culture of hegemonic whiteness were and remain endemic to the Canadian state.

Further, an assumption of Canada as anti-racist safe space, and America as racist space, fails to explain the reality of the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad was in fact the product primarily of the struggle for self-emancipation of American black slaves. The central place of these actors as agents of their own freedom struggle needs to be recognized and restored, and taken as a theoretical and historical starting point in explaining the pre-history of Confederation. There were of course critical allies of the escaped slaves who fled for their freedom, but for the better part of the journey from south to north it was American abolitionists who were the most pivotal supporters in the operation of the Underground Railroad. Those free men and women who acted in solidarity and risked their lives standing beside American slaves were largely, though not exclusively, American – both free black and white abolitionists. Collectively this movement sought refuge on British colonial soil. The British North America that was to become the 'promised land' of the emancipated slaves was not, however, neutral and inclusive; it was a contested arena of class and racialized interests. A new nascent bourgeoisie was in the making, and ultimately defined itself as a 'loyal' but independent ally of the British colonial, imperial, and racialized project.

Slavery and Resistance

The Underground Railroad was one among a number of means to resist oppression, where the principal actors were the slaves themselves. The slaves were driven to escape the brutal reality of plantation slavery in the southern US. This was a profit-driven system, capitalist in its production of commodities for the market – including sugar, rum, cotton and tobacco – but dependent upon forced and coerced labour. The dynamic drive was the production of absolute surplus value, in contrast to the development of the modern industrial proletariat involved in the production of relative surplus value (Bakan, 1987).

A brief overview of the extent of slavery in the US at the time of the Underground Railroad provides some context to the conditions faced by these early resisters. In 1770, pre-revolutionary colonial America was a region where black slaves produced three-quarters of the exports, but comprised only 18 percent of the population. In the southern colonies, however, slaves comprised 40 percent of the population (Blackburn, 1997: 459). After 1776, with the victory of the American Revolution against British imperialism, an unstable alliance between the planter class in the south and the expanding industrial bourgeoisie in the north institutionalized, for a time, the maintenance of slavery. Slavery was challenged during the revolutionary period, but it was also aggressively defended by the section of the new American ruling class that depended upon slave labour for their survival and profit. After American independence, even in conditions of compromise, there were a number of reforms and tensions were immediately present. Slavery was abolished in the northern states; the African slave trade was halted; and the number of free blacks living in the south increased. At the same time, the number of slaves in the US south continued to grow. According to US census data, in 1790 there were approximately 697,900 slaves in the US; in 1860 the number stood at nearly 4 million (Kolchin, 1993: 242). Only with the end of the US Civil War was slavery finally legally abolished.

In the meantime, slaves rebelled and resisted continuously, and in any way possible. They slowed their pace of forced labour, poisoned their masters, hid their children or nursed them for the longest possible period of time to resist field labour, organized secret societies of resistance and planned and executed mass, armed rebellions (Bakan, 1990; Blackburn, 1988; Genovese, 1976; James, 1989; Holt, 1992)

One form of resistance was escape, and the Underground Railroad was one of the main escape routes. Sometimes a last stop was one of the free states of New England. But the colonies that comprised British North America, generically 'Canada', were widely considered to be the last stop on the line. The North Star was the main reference on the unwritten maps that fugitive slaves followed (Gara, 1981; Bordewich, 2005; McKittrick, 2007).

The Underground Railroad was a network of supporters, in their majority illegally organized, to promote, encourage, and cover for the escape of slaves from the US south to freedom. Pre-Confederation Canada, at the time a collection of British colonies in North America, served as a destination point for escaped slaves from the United States.

Underground Railroad and Empire

For the period from the early 1820s to the 1860s, when the Underground Railroad was most active, British colonialism was in a phase of transition. It was moving from an empire based on monopoly trade and slave plantation labour concentrated in the Americas, to a

more productive and competitive phase of industrial capitalism where free trade and wage labour were the hallmarks, and Asia was becoming the most productive colonial outpost (Williams, 1944; Blackburn, 1997; 1998).

Britain was one empire in the context of competing empires, where colonialism and anti-colonialism were contesting strategies as the industrial bourgeoisie extended its reach from various quarters. The bourgeois revolutionary movements in the United States and France had combined radical democratic rhetoric with the preservation of the most barbaric and anti-democratic practices known to date. Colonial conquest and destruction of indigenous peoples were central to the project; this was augmented by other barbarisms, including the kidnapping, imprisonment, branding and trading in human flesh that was the Atlantic slave trade (Baum, 2006; Nimtz, 2003).

British abolitionism emerged in successive phases of debate from the 1790s, but also faced a hardening ideological backlash that justified racism and slavery in more overt forms (Hochschild, 2005). The motivating force for emancipation, however, was not in Westminster, but among the slaves themselves. Slave rebellions in the colonies of the Caribbean demanded that the democratic rhetoric be put into practice. The most advanced and widespread revolutionary uprising of black slaves took place in Haiti (San Domingue) in 1804, under the leadership of Toussaint L'Ouverture (James, 1989; Blackburn, 1988). The implications for the empires of Europe were not lost. As Robin Blackburn summarizes:

> *The precarious survival of Haitian independence was a thorn in the side of the slave order throughout the western hemisphere. The overturn in St. Domingue and the consolidation of black power in Haiti had a terrible message for the slave order throughout the Americas. Black rebels in Cuba in 1812, in the United States in 1820, in Jamaica and Brazil in the 1820s, found inspiration in Haiti. British, French and North American abolitionists all wrote books about Toussaint L'Ouverture and the drama of the Haitian revolution. The example of St. Domingue lived on in the fears of planters and colonial authorities (1988: 257).*

In Britain's largest and most prosperous plantation colony, Jamaica, a mass rebellion in 1831 was inspired by confidence among the slaves that the Crown would support emancipation, only to be quelled by the reality of brutal imperial repression (Bakan, 1990). The most far-sighted sections of imperialist capitalism shifted their investments to more profitable industrial ventures based on wage labour. In 1807, responding to the combined pressures of rebellion from below and industrial expansion promising high profits based on the exploitation of wage labour, Britain eliminated the slave trade (Hochschild, 2005).

Slavery, however, in the British North American colonies that were to become Canada, continued until 1834, though it took a different form than in the US. According to colonial

law and following the edicts of Westminster, by the 1820s escaped slaves from the United States were to be considered legally free. The principle actors involved in obtaining this freedom, however, were not the colonial elites who were to shape Confederation and the conditions of expanded capitalism north of the 49th parallel. It was the action of the slaves themselves, with the solidarity of their abolitionist allies, that forced the divide among the various sections of capital and shifted the balance towards full legal emancipation.

The Underground Railroad was central to this process. It included a network of activists, largely based in the United States, organized in solidarity with escaped and escaping slaves. The Underground Railroad can best be understood as an early form of social movement, but not functioning in conditions of liberal democracy usually associated with the term (Carroll, 1997). The Underground Railroad was an example of solidarity and organization in very dangerous conditions, traversing racial and national boundaries. It was organized and structured by those who were committed to a notion of freedom promised but not fulfilled, inspired by the revolutionary democratic upsurge that marked the anti-colonial period of the Americas.

Organizing Underground

The origin of the term 'Underground Railroad' is itself obscure. One origin is suggested by Eber C. Pettit who recalled reading an article in a Washington, D.C. newspaper in about 1839 that involved a captured fugitive slave. After having been tortured for the crime of escape from slavery, he confessed that he was to have been sent on a trip north and that "the railroad went underground all the way to Boston."[2] Pettit comments:

> *[T]hus it will be seen that this famous thoroughfare was first called the 'Underground Railroad' in the city of Washington....It had, like all other railroads, its officers and stations, engineers and conductors, ticket agents and train dispatchers, hotels and eating houses (Pettit in Gara, 1961: 173-4).*

Over the various places where Underground Railroad stations existed, and over the years it operated, it was in fact more varied than this picture presents. Certainly there were places and times when an impressive level of overt organization was in place. At other times, slaves simply ran from the horrific conditions of slavery, not knowing where their next stop would be or where they would ultimately find safety. At some point along the journey, sometimes after the most difficult part of the escape was behind them, abolitionists, Quakers, or militant free blacks including those such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, or in Canada, Mary Ann Shadd, would aid fugitive slaves. They would negotiate through a complex network of survival posts linked to the political project of abolition (Bordewich, 2005; Blockson, 1987; Shadd, et al., 2004; Bearden and Butler, 1977). Years before the name was used to describe the network of escaping fugitive slaves, solidarity

2 See Pettit in Gara (1961: 173-74).

among slaves and non-slaves to aid in escape was reported.

George Washington, well-known as the first president of the United States of America but less known for his commitment to slavery in principle and practice, complained as early as 1786 about fugitive slaves in Philadelphia, "which a society of Quakers in the city (formed for such purposes) have attempted to liberate" (Blockson, 1984: 9). It was not, however, only American white abolitionists who helped slaves escape. Ottawa Aboriginal peoples in western Ohio led by Chief Kinjeino were among the first reported to help fugitive slaves. And according to one report: "Portuguese fisherman are said to have conspired with members of the Shinnecock tribe to transport fugitive slaves from the north shore of Long Island into ports of freedom in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island" (Blockson, 1984: 9).

In the west of the US, sections of the Underground Railroad were started in the period after the War of 1812, moving

> *their passengers northeast from Ohio and Indiana to the shores of Lake Erie, and from Illinois and Iowa toward the southern extremity of Lake Michigan. On both Lakes, conductors established contact with river pilots who would safely convey their human cargo to Canada (Katz, 1973: 99).*

An estimated 100,000 fled, mainly between the years 1830 and the outbreak of the US Civil War in 1860 (Hill, 2005: ix). During the 1850s, about a thousand slaves per year escaped to various destinations, including Mexico, the northern US states, and Canada. Repression from slaveholders and their army of police and slave catchers may have been the reason for the reduced numbers from 1,011 in 1850 to 803 in 1860, but the repression was never able to stop the efforts of escape (Genovese, 1976: 648). Most of the fugitive slave routes went through New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana and Michigan – and the nearest British territory was Ontario. Other routes ended in New Brunswick and Montreal; and from California to Vancouver Island. Many who escaped were unable to survive the passage to Canada. Estimates of the number of fugitives living in Canada from the US vary; but 40,000-60,000 are estimated to have resided in Ontario, which was where the majority arrived (Walker, 1980: 56).

Canada: No Promised Land

What did this land called Canada really have to offer the escaping slaves? Canada, or the Canadas before Confederation, were not, as stated earlier, dependent on plantation slave labour. This was distinct from the plantation colonies that were to become the southern region of the United States, the Caribbean region of the British, French and Dutch empires, or the Latin American region of the Spanish and Portuguese empires. But the absence of

a plantation economy was not because of moral opposition to the brutality or overt racism of the slave labour system. Plantation slavery was simply not profitable given the seasonal climatic conditions. While sections of the colonial elite were opposed to slavery – most notably the newspaper publisher and politician George Brown – such a perspective was in no way universal, nor even a dominant view (Mayers, 2003). It was not out of altruism but pragmatism that the profits accruing to the Canadian ruling class were gleaned by means other than plantation slavery. Moreover, slavery in various forms remained legal, even as American fugitive slaves were permitted to live in the British North American colonies.

Canada was framed as a federal state in 1867, in the afterglow of the American Civil War. The loyalties of the framers were not on the side of the north, nor the abolition to slavery; in fact, the nascent Canadian ruling class was virulently racist, not only towards blacks but also Aboriginal peoples and Métis, Québécois, and later Chinese and other immigrant labourers (Bordewich, 2005; Cooper, 2005).

Estimates are that in 1759, there were more than 1000 slaves in what is now Quebec. As early as 1749, there were slaves in Halifax; in 1783, Loyalist settlers fleeing the rebellious colonies that would become the United States of America, brought about 2000 slaves to Canada (Barratt, 1990: 66). With a population of only about 120,000 this was a significant percentage (Harris and Warkentin, 1974: 93). One Toronto newspaper editorial in 1851 revealed the hypocrisy:

> *Already we have a far greater number of negroes in the province than the good of the country requires, and we would suggest the propriety of levying a poll tax on all who may come to us for the future.... We abhor slavery, but patriotism induces us to explain having our country overrun by blacks, many of whom are woefully depraved by their previous mode of life (Gara, 1961:66).*

Though far from a Promised Land, refugees and activists found in Canada officially neutral territory where slaves could find their last stop on the Underground Railroad in conditions of a legally safe haven. But despite freedom, "[m]ost refugees discovered upon their arrival in Canada that they had traded one kind of insecurity for another" (Bordewich, 2005: 259). Racism, poverty and dashed hopes led many to return to the US after the Civil War (Hochschild, 2005).

Slavery and Anti-Slavery in Canada

Slavery was only abolished in Canada, as it was throughout the British empire, in 1834. But the end of slavery in the empire was not an act of altruism from above (Fryer, 1984; Holt, 1992; Hochschild, 2005). Slavery was practiced during the period of settlement of New France, and continued after British Conquest of French Canada in 1759. The 1760

"Articles of Capitulation of Montreal", which comprised Canada's first constitutional document, enshrined to the remaining French and the dominant British colonial elites the simultaneous suppression of the majority poor Québécois, and the continuation of possession of black and Aboriginal slaves.

Slavery was confirmed again by the Peace Treaty of 1763 and the Quebec Act of 1774. Against the background of US independence in 1776, with its mix of slave and non-slave colonies, the first session of the first Parliament of Upper Canada in 1793 enacted a measure to prevent the entry of slaves. But this was done without threatening the control of the white landowners; the practice of slavery was not made illegal. Any slave entering Upper Canada independently was to be considered immediately free. But their children, born after 1793, would not be free until age 25. And slaves already living in Upper Canada remained slaves for life (Winks, 1997).

An abolition bill introduced in 1793 in Lower Canada was tabled without a vote. Slavery and anti-slavery forces clashed in the courts over the issue of the use of state power to return runaway slaves. In Lower Canada in 1800, one Chief Justice James Monk ruled an opinion that slavery was illegal; in the same year in the Maritimes, chief justices began to demand legal documentation of ownership - both of the master and the previous owner - before a master could re-claim an escaped slave (Winks, 1997).

In Lower Canada, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, though slavery continued to be legal, if slaves could manage to escape they were not subject to court order of return (Walker, 1980: 24-25). In 1826, when approached by US authorities regarding the escape of slaves to Canada, the powers that be informed that it would be "utterly impossible for them to agree to a stipulation for the surrender of fugitive slaves" (Ryerson, 1983: 327).

This patchwork of legal recognition of slavery in Canada and opposition to the return of fugitive slaves to the US, indicates the refusal of even the reformers to challenge the most prominent Canadian ruling class interests that defended and supported slavery. At the same time, the split in the world's ruling classes over the issue of slave labour or wage labour, was reflected within the Canadian colonial system.

Divisions among the authorities greatly favoured the slaves' ability to escape from their US masters. But this unstable condition in no way indicated a commitment on the part of the burgeoning Canadian ruling class to challenge either the institution of slavery or the racist practices surrounding it. In fact, this tactic mimicked a ploy taken by the British against the rebellious US colonies. In 1775, just before the successful ending of the American Revolution, the British Colonial Governor of Virginia, Lord Dunmore, offered freedom to any slave that would desert the rebel American planters. But no similar offer

was made to slaves of Loyalist masters. The offer was repeated after the US colonies had won their independence in 1779. As Robin Blackburn puts it: "This offer was made simply with the intention of disrupting the rebel forces, and any wider anti-slavery message was scrupulously avoided" (1987: 482).

Waves of American settlers to the British North American colonies became early students of Canadian hypocrisy. Loyalists who settled in Canada arrived with their slaves, fleeing the United States in large measure because they remained 'loyal' to the part of the British North American colonial empire that defended the slave system. After the founding of Halifax in 1749, for example, the trade in slaves was aggressively pursued for the next fifty years (Ryerson, 1983). Britain also promised land in Nova Scotia to American slaves who fled in opposition to the War of Independence. But where former slaves were able to establish some form of self-sufficiency, as in the community of Africville in Halifax, Nova Scotia, every level of government over decades undermined the community's existence (Nieves, 2007; Clairmont and Magill, 1999; Allen, 2002). However, by the 1800s, British opposition to the growth of the US as an economic competitor combined with abolitionist pressures against slavery. As Bordewich summarizes:

> *In the 1820s, Canada had for all practical purposes ceased to sanction the return of fugitive slaves to the United States. In 1826, after months of fruitless negotiations, Albert Gallatin, the American minister to the Court of St. James, wrote resignedly to Secretary of State Henry Clay that Britain refused to depart from the 'principle recognized by the British courts that every man is free who reaches British ground.' A series of fugitive slave cases in the mid-1830s hardened the Crown's resolve (2005: 247).*

At the same time, as openings allowing for the escape of free slaves to Canada widened, the repression against escaped slaves in the US intensified. The Fugitive Slave Act was passed in the US in 1851. This law greatly strengthened an earlier act of 1793, giving slaveholders the right to organize a posse at any place in the United States to aid in recapturing runaway slaves. Courts and police in any state in the US became obliged to assist the slaveholders. Blockson summarizes the practical impact of the law:

> *As a result, slave hunters plied their trade under the protection of governmental authority in all the free states bordering on slave states and even far into New England. Fugitives were plucked from churches in Ohio, from ships in Boston harbour, from the bosoms of free wives and husbands whom they had married in the North. The runaways were not safe anywhere in the nation. Those who aided them faced criminal penalties of six months in jail and a $1000 fine in addition to a civil liability to the order of $1000 for each fugitive (1984: 39).*

The passing of the new fugitive law aroused the ire of Canadian liberal reformers like George Brown who denounced the "despicable subserviency of the North" with the southern slave states (Ryerson, 1983: 330). It was after the passage of the Fugitive Act that the activity of the Underground Railroad and its Canadian station stops accelerated.

Abolition was a subject of debate in Europe and the Americas among the capitalist ruling classes of the period, with the deep divisions most overtly expressed in the US Civil War. But the definitive factor in the transition from slave to wage labour was slave resistance. Abolition in the British empire was provoked by a massive slave rebellion in Jamaica in 1831. The 'Christmas Rebellion' took the form of a strike, and was inspired in large measure by the Christian biblical passage indicating that an individual should not serve two masters. The main demand was that their work should be paid in wages. While the rebellion was remarkably well prepared, starting on Christmas Day, 1831, the massacre that ensued expressing the rage of the British colonial elite was not anticipated. The enormous cost of repression and the fear of continuous rebellions against slavery throughout the British colonial empire, combined with the lure of a more profitable system of industrial capital, compelled Westminster to abolish slavery by the early part of the nineteenth century (Williams, 1944; Bakan, 1990; Holt, 1992).

Strategy and Tactics in the Anti-slavery Movement

As the anti-slavery movement advanced, debates developed over strategy and tactics. This pattern of debate prefigured experiences of modern social movements. Among those challenging slavery in the US and Canada, the impact of 'emigration', as it was called, was contested. A debate emerged about the relative merits of slave escape to the North regarding the goal of abolition. Among the participants was Mary Shadd, the first black woman on the North American continent to found and edit a weekly newspaper, *The Provincial Freeman,* distributed in Windsor, Toronto, and Chatham during the 1850s. In calling for slaves to escape to Canada, Shadd was challenged by the US black abolitionist Frederick Douglass. He feared that the best and bravest among the slave leaders would leave rather than stay and fight slavery on US soil (Bearden and Butler, 1977: 142-43).

In practice, the two strategies were not counterposed, but mutually supportive. The opportunity to find even temporary safety in Canada, at least in certain cases, fuelled the confidence of other slaves to challenge slavery at home. John Brown, the white abolitionist and son of an Underground Railroad stationmaster, and a conductor himself, led an armed insurrection to preserve Kansas from slavery in May of 1856, killing five men in revenge of an earlier attack by pro-slavery forces. In December 1858, John Brown set out with a group of 11 slave men, women and children, on a winter journey of a thousand miles from Missouri to Windsor, Canada. The trip took three weeks, and the arrival with "but one man killed" was regarded by Brown as a remarkable accomplishment (Siebert, 1968: 165).

In 1859, Brown and his guerrilla army of about twenty followers seized a government arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in hopes of provoking a slave rebellion. Mary Ann Shadd was among the trusted conspirators who met with John Brown in Windsor. There he discussed and refined the plans for the Harpers Ferry rebellion. Shadd's husband, brother, and a young family friend named Osborne P. Anderson, were all involved with John Brown in planning the revolt. Anderson would later write a book, *A Voice from Harper's Ferry*, edited and published by Mary Ann Shadd (Bearden and Butler, 1977: 195). Though Brown was taken prisoner, tried for treason, and hanged, he remains to this day a martyred symbol of the heroic fight against slavery in the US (Blockson, 1984; Bordewich, 2005). The efforts of those who supported both escape and rebellion combined to produce one of the most significant challenges to southern slavery in US history.

Oh Canada

The story of the Underground Railroad reveals a history of racism and barbarism; but it is also one of resistance, solidarity, and ultimately, victory. Understanding the legacy of both racism and anti-racism is, however, also of more than historical significance. Such an understanding suggests important lessons for progressive scholarship and social movements today.

For example, post-9/11 trends towards racial profiling and anti-Muslim racism, or Islamophobia, are not, from such a starting point, merely unfortunate or accidental deviations from an established norm or history of racial neutrality (O'Connor, 2006). Nor are slavery and slave resistance aberrations, to be met with "surprise" and "wonder" as exceptions to an otherwise inclusive, race-neutral national ethos (McKittrick, 2006: 91-119). The misconception that slavery was non-existent or only of marginal significance in Canadian history runs wide and deep, no less in the critical literature than in mainstream political histories (Morton, 1983; Chodos, 1967).

The Canadian state in the 19th century, like the Canadian state in the 21st century, has at times advanced its interests domestically and internationally by claiming to be distinct from the United States on the basis of its apparently more inclusive, anti-racist policies. Multiculturalism today, for example, is seen as a principle against which events such as the Maher Arar affair or the botched peacekeeping efforts in Somalia are taken to be isolated aberrations (O'Connor, 2006; Razack, 2004). Alan Cairns (1999) draws a dividing line between Canada's historic identity with colonialism, what he deems a period of 'Globalization I', and a more modern era of liberalization in 'Globalization II'. The latter is marked by the end of formal colonialism, and "post-imperial heterogeneity of the international society of states" (Cairns, 1999: 33). It is encouraging to see serious and open acknowledgement of Canada's racist past. However, the model is teleological; it presumes that changes in hegemonic rule progress naturally in an evolutionary path towards greater

inclusiveness. It mistakenly presumes that time moves capitalist ruling classes inexorably towards more liberal approaches to racialized minorities. In fact, discernible changes in immigration and employment legislation have been slow to respond, even to demands for changes in labour market recruitment. Where change has occurred, this has usually resulted from social movements demanding change from below, such as the US civil rights movement, the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, or indeed, the period of slave resistance considered here. Moreover, time does not necessarily heal; legislation regarding foreign domestic workers in Canada, for example, has tended to become more restrictive rather than more inclusive (Bakan and Stasiulis, 1997; 2005). A similar pattern is evidenced by the post-9/11 reality (Bakan, 2005; Abu-Laban, 2005; Galabuzi, 2005; Smith, 2007).

An approach that emphasizes the racist and pro-imperialist character of the making of the Canadian state also challenges the left nationalist emphasis that has historically been a hallmark of Canadian political economy. The emphasis has tended to be on the progressive national character of the Canadian ruling class relative to that of the US (Drache and Cameron, 1985; Levitt, 1970; Laxer, 1973; Lumsden, 1970; Teeple, 1972). Regarding the role of racist ideology in the Canadian state, this has often been either minimized or absented (Strong-Boag et al., 1998). Robert Chodos, for example, a prominent left nationalist and the author of a formative text in the 1970s, *The Caribbean Connection: The Double-Edged Canadian Presence* wrote: "It would be closer to the truth to call Canadians a nation of innocents about race relations...To a large extent, Canadians know little of racial prejudice because they have little experience of racial diversity" (1977: 221).

This is of course inaccurate historically: Canadians are in fact quite expert in the realm of racial prejudice, as is common knowledge among numerous generations of oppressed peoples. Moreover, this view also inaccurately suggests that racism is learned only through interaction with people of colour. Racism is an ideological construct developed and propagated as part of ruling class hegemony, not the invention of racialized peoples who are its victims (Bakan, 2008; Ignatiev, 1995; Allen, 1997; Baum, 2006).

Chodos further suggests that Canada is similar to the West Indies, suffering in common "under the long shadow of the United States" (1977: 63). In fact, Canada's relationship to the Caribbean has been as an imperialist power. The imperialist nature of Canadian investment in the region is longstanding, originating when the British North American colonies replaced trade routes previously established through the rebellious thirteen colonies of United States (Tennyson, 1990b; Hyett, 1993; Bakan, Cox and Leys, 1993). This relationship is also clearly outlined, if uncritically, in what may appear a surprising source. Kari Levitt, the author of the classic left nationalist work, *Silent Surrender* (1970),

was formerly an advisor to the government of Trinidad and Tobago. Working under the auspices of the International Monetary Fund, she was also the author, with Alistair McIntyre, of *Canada-West Indies Economic Relations* (1967). In this earlier text, the authors argue for an increase in Canadian investment and trade in the English Caribbean, uncritically advancing a classical liberal modernization model.

Left nationalism continues to influence critical scholarship regarding contemporary issues of globlaization, immigration policy and racialization. A comparison of two recent texts indicates the divergence in approaches to the relationship between racism and the Canadian state. Stephen Clarkson's *Uncle Sam and Us: Globalization, Neoconservatism and the Canadian State* (2002) and Grace-Edward Galabuzi's *Canada's Economic Apartheid* (2005) address strikingly similar general subject matter. Both explain Canada's relationship to contemporary pressures of neo-liberalism, both consider the impact of globalization on state policy and social formations, and both look at the interplay among economic, social and political factors from a critical perspective. However, Clarkson's study is virtually race-blind in its methodology, scope and content. Galabuzi, however, emphasizes the centrality of racism and immigration policy in explaining the making and maintenance of Canadian capitalism in the 20th and 21st centuries, advancing the concept of 'economic apartheid' as a central element of state formation and action. A comparison of two books with distinctly different assumptions at the outset may appear unfair; however, this selection of titles is more, rather than less, representative of distinct lines of enquiry.

The argument presented here is consistent with the approach suggested by Galabuzi, where state-supported racism is understood to be both an historic and current feature of globalized capitalism and imperialism. This perspective attempts to reassert the centrality of racism as part of the making of the Canadian state and the ruling class hegemonic bloc. Slavery and the racism that is endemic to it, as realities in the shaping of the Canadian state, were central to this process.

Revisiting Ryerson

This approach, while a challenge to the left nationalist assumptions of much of Canadian political economy, is not without antecedent in the field. Though commonly neglected in its relevance to current debates, Stanley Ryerson's two-volume history of the origins of Canada contributes significantly to this perspective (Ryerson, 1975; 1983). While racism *per se* is not the focus of his study, Ryerson's historical account of the making of the Canadian state threads the reality of slavery and the oppression of the continent's indigenous peoples into the fabric of the narrative. The making and re-making of a culture of whiteness, though again not in these terms, is clearly evidenced through Ryerson's careful, and scathingly critical, documentation.

From Ryerson we learn, for example, of the political sympathies towards the southern Confederacy of John A. Macdonald, Canada's first prime minister and a central figure in advocating confederation. Macdonald cut his political baby teeth as a lawyer, for a period as the Attorney-General of Canada West. He was the hired advocate for an organization of vigilantes committed to 'peace' through support for the South. One of these Copperhead conspirators, a man named Headley who was an arsonist raider on New York City, set fire to a dozen large hotels in November of 1864, hoping to create panic in the North and divert military efforts. His memoirs of "Confederate Operations in Canada and New York", studied by Ryerson, reveal that Headley returned to his headquarters in Toronto after the incident to prepare for anticipated prosecutions. Headley writes:

> *At the suggestion of Col. Thompson (the chief Confederate Commissioner) it was deemed advisable that we retain Hon. John Macdonald as counsel in the event of a requisition, as he is friendly to our cause and was regarded as a very eminent lawyer. One evening after supper...we rode in a sleigh to the residence of Mr. Macdonald in the suburbs of Toronto. He greeted us cordially and we discussed our case fully until a late hour. The arrangement was made and a retainer fee was paid the following day. But it happened that the time never arrived when his services were required (cited in Ryerson, 1983: 334-35).*

Macdonald was not shy about his hope for a Confederate victory. When speaking at a banquet a few months prior to this encounter, Macdonald made a point of lauding "the gallant defence that is being made by the Southern Republic" (Ryerson, 1983: 335). In fact, Macdonald was only expressing a stance widely held among the elite that were to become the ruling class of the new Canada, one consistent with the position taken by the British colonial state (Mayers, 2003). Ryerson suggests a description of this war-time solidarity with the slave owners of the US South:

> *[T]he wealthy, like their English counterparts, sympathized with the rebel slavocracy. Montreal and Toronto 'Society' wined and dined visiting Southern gentlemen, whose numbers multiplied as the war progressed. The Confederates established a large-scale base of operations in 'neutral' Canada. From the fashionable Queen's Hotel of Toronto (where the Royal York now stands) and the St. Lawrence Hall Hotel of St. James St. in Montreal, they hatched conspiracies, launched raids, and organized attacks on shipping, prisoner-of-war camps, and the civilian populations of Northern cities. Confederate High Commissioners Thompson and Clay deposited huge sums (a million dollars, by one estimate) with the Bank of Montreal, with which they financed activities directed against the North. Valadigham, the leading Copperhead conspirator, worked in St. Catharines, Niagara Falls and Windsor. Confederate agents filtering through the North reached Canada via Detroit and Buffalo; some shipped through the blockade at sea to reach Halifax, where a headquarters of*

> *theirs operated from a hideout 'on Barrington Street, over a confectionery store.' …Confederates operating out of Montreal raided St. Albans, Vt., and got away with $170,000. Devlin, a prominent Montreal attorney, defended the bandits, and a Tory magistrate in defiance of international law hastened to set them free….The slaveowners' leaders in Canada had a fund of $200,000 set aside for subversive operations that ranged from germ warfare to presidential assassination (1983: 334-35).*

Ryerson notes that even the unusual designation of the new Canadian state as a 'Confederation' may be suggestive of sympathy with the southern states in the US Civil War. The term itself, he maintains, is a misnomer. The 'confederacy' refers a union of states which delegate authority to a central government of limited sovereignty; while a federal government indicates a state that is fully sovereign, and the constituent bodies have limited authority. Ryerson cites W.P.M. Kennedy's *The Constitution of Canada,* published in 1922, where it is suggested that in the debates in 1865 leading to Canada's confederation, the terms "federation" and "confederation" were deliberately used without clear definition. The aim of the advocates was to confuse and camouflage the contentious issue, and in so doing, ensure consent (Ryerson, 1983: 443). Ryerson asks the provocative question, regarding the invention of "Confederation" as a term applied to the Canadian federal dominion state: "[W]as it derived from a politician's instinct to steal something from the Opposition (the *Rouges* were demanding the looser union of a confederacy) or from the well-known Tory sympathy with the Southern Confederacy?" (1983: 371).

The founding party of the Canadian state was a strong ally of the most racist section of the global elite of the day. As the US Civil War unfolded, even the assassin of US President Abraham Lincoln found solace among his allies in the British colonial states of pre-Confederation Canada (Mayers, 2003). The notorious John Wilkes Booth noted in his diary that the conspiracy leading to the assassination was started six months prior to the act, exactly the time when he had arrived in Montreal and stayed at the St. Lawrence Hall Hotel. From Montreal, Booth went immediately to Maryland, "to recruit the murder gang" (Ryerson, 1983: 337). Attempts to prove the links between Booth and his visit to Montreal, however, were originally stymied by lack of evidence. Only many years later was it discovered that one Colonel Baker, at the time the US North's head of the Secret Service, had in his possession the missing page from the register of the St. Lawrence Hall Hotel, bearing the signature of J. Wilkes Booth and dated October 18, 1864 (Ryerson, 1983: 337).

Stanley Ryerson, a Marxist historian and leading figure in Canadian socialist studies, clearly presents the founding of Canada as the creation of a racist, corrupt business class. The 'dream of Canada' was motivated, in this detailed account, principally as the creative

accomplishment of a section of Canadian society identified explicitly with imperial Britain, the Protestant church, the southern slave-holding confederacy in the United States, and, of course, big business, particularly linked to the railway and banking sectors. These elements collectively contributed to the construction of a hegemonic bloc grounded in a culture of whiteness and committed to the expansion of capital from coast to coast to coast. Ryerson's history of early Canada offers a stitch that can be usefully picked up in knitting together current understandings of Canadian political economy and the Canadian state.

Conclusion

The perspective suggested here highlights the centrality of slavery and racialization in the making of the Canadian imperial state through a reconsideration of the legacy of the Underground Railroad. It has been argued that there are two related misconceptions that need to be reconsidered: one, of Canada as a place of rescue of American black slaves in the Underground Railroad; and a second, of the Canadian nation as a race-neutral space historically and in the present, interrupted only by exceptional racialized aberrations. These misconceptions are rooted, however, in an accurate historical fact: fugitive American slaves were not returned to their US masters upon arriving on British colonial, quasi-Canadian soil. However, what motivated British colonial and Canadian elite policy at the time regarding slavery in America was based on pragmatic adjustments to imperial contestation regarding the occupation of North American lands rather than moral or ethical commitment.

As we pass the 140th anniversary of Confederation, it may be appropriate to consider the character of the Canadian state and the elite, or ruling class, project that was established at that time. A growing school of thought has challenged the historically dominant analysis in Canadian political economy that places the state broadly in the framework of a 'dependency' or weak state relative to the United States (Kellogg, 2004; 2005; Engler and Fenton, 2005; Gordon, 2006; Burgess, 2002; Carroll, 1986; Moore and Wells, 1975; McNally, 1981). Alternatively, the Canadian state has been identified as a sovereign, advanced capitalist power, with an expansionist and imperialist dynamic. Another body of literature similarly presumes the capitalist and imperialist nature of the Canadian state but places emphasis on the centrality of racism in the maintenance and reproduction of elite hegemony (Abu-Laban, 2005; Abu-Laban and Gabriel, 2002; Bakan and Stasiulis, 1997; 2005; Bakan, 2008; Bannerji, 1993; 1995; 2000; Bolaria and Li, 1988; Bristow et al., 1994; Cooper, 2006; Clarke, 2006; Galabuzi, 2005; Henry et al., 1995; Henry and Tator, 2002; Iacovetta and Das Gupta, 2000; Lee and Cardinal, 1998; Levine-Rasky, 2000; Li, 1999; Lawrence, 2004; McKittrick, 2006; 2007; Mensah, 2002; Razack, 1998; 2002; 2004; Thobani, 2007; Tennyson, 1990a).

Collectively, these literatures persuasively demonstrate, theoretically and empirically, that: i) the Canadian state is an imperialist state; and, ii) racism, as a constructed ideology of ascribed hierarchies and as a set of materially grounded, oppressive institutional practices based on such ascribed hierarchies, is deeply embedded in the hegemonic project of the Canadian ruling class and in Canadian society. While neither of these arguments is universally accepted in Canadian political economy, it is reasonable to build on these foundational premises to advance our understanding of the specific nature of the Canadian state - in the present and historically. New avenues of enquiry may be pursued, including those that deepen our understanding of the relationships between political economy and oppression, capital and slavery, and race and class. These are subjects that merit further exploration, ones that can hopefully continue to inspire both scholarship and the building of the type of solidarity demonstrated by those who came before us.

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