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Contested Spaces: Runaway Slaves and Location in the Bahama Islands

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Abstract

During the Age of Revolutions, runaway slave advertisements throughout the Atlantic World not only recorded the authors' ideas about race but also disseminated and reified these perceptions in specific Atlantic locales. This paper examines descriptions and perceptions of geography in runaway advertisements published by the Bahama Gazette from 1784 to 1795, and these advertisements reveal that these perceptions were constantly contested by occupants of the Bahama Islands, whether formerly enslaved African or African-descended individuals or enslavers seeking to recover their human property. These contests over perceptions of geography influenced the construction of race throughout the islands. This paper employs runaway advertisements to pose and answer questions such as "where did enslavers believe African or African-descended individuals belonged," "how did enslavers perceive their local geography," and most importantly, "how did African and African-descended individuals resist these European and Euro-American perceptions in their escapes from enslavement."

Keywords: Race, Slavery, Runaway Slaves, Geography, Communication Networks

By 1783, Castalio spoke three languages—English, Dutch, and French. He had travelled to multiple Atlantic locales, including the Dutch colony of St. Eustatia, Holland, Charleston, and

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New York. His tribal scarifications, described as “country marks on each side of his face,” denoted his African origin, although his specific ethnicity remained unnamed (Chambers 2). Castalio’s Atlantic journey spanning three continents is only known, however, because of his escape from his enslaver, Henry Schoolbred, at New York in August 1783. Almost a year and a half after Castalio’s escape, Schoolbred drafted a runaway advertisement describing Castalio, but it took over two months for the advertisement to be published in Nassau’s *Bahama Gazette*. The *Bahama Gazette* had an Atlantic journey of its own; its printer, Henry Wells, was one of several thousand Loyalists displaced after the War for American Independence. Well’s Atlantic journey spanned from Charleston to St. Augustine and finally Nassau, the capital of the Bahama Islands, where he established the *Bahama Gazette* (Jasanoff 223). According to Schoolbred’s advertisement, Castalio was “supposed to have been carried to Abaco, or some other of the Bahama Islands, by some white person.” For the capture and re-enslavement of Castalio, Schoolbred listed two persons as points of deposit, “Messrs. Forbes & Stevens, of Nassau, New Providence” and himself in “Charleston, South-Carolina” (Chambers 2).[1]

Schoolbred’s description of Castalio’s journey demonstrates how enslavers attempted to shape perceptions of geography according to their goals, specifically the capture and re-enslavement of African runaways or runaways of African descent. Throughout his advertisement, Schoolbred conceptualized the geography of the Atlantic World in the framework of freedom, slavery, and resistance. Castalio was enslaved in St. Eustatia, Holland, and Charleston, but he resisted enslavement and ran away in New York. Schoolbred listed Abaco and the Bahama Islands as potential locations for the escaped Castalio, and he referenced Nassau and Charleston as deposit points for individuals seeking to profit from

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Castalio's re-enslavement. Living in Charleston, Schoolbred utilized Atlantic information networks, most notably the *Bahama Gazette*, in his attempt to capture and re-enslave Castalio.

This paper examines runaway advertisements published by the *Bahama Gazette* from 1784 to 1795, and these advertisements reveal that occupants of the Bahama Islands constantly contested perceptions of the colony's geography. Within the Bahama Islands, enslavers copied Schoolbred's example and employed information networks of both inter- and intra-island communication to construct a "centralizing model" of geographical perceptions. Within this model, enslavers attempted to impose their perceptions of where enslaved African and African-descended individuals belonged throughout the Bahama Islands, and by extension, the Atlantic World. This "centralizing model" placed enslaver's plantations or residence at the center. Enslavers then perceived external locations as peripheries to their plantation or residence, and they employed communication networks to expand their reach beyond their plantation and denote the potential locations of runaways. After expanding their reach, enslavers sought to employ other persons as deposit points for returning and re-enslaving individuals of African descent. Although enslavers constructed this centralizing model of geography to capture and re-enslave runaways, this model only occurred as a response to runaways' resistance. By risking escape from their former enslaver's plantation or residence, runaways contested enslaver's perception of geography through their journeys away from slavery, which often led them from one island to another. Within the Bahama Islands, the human landscape and perceptions of geography were constantly contested as enslavers attempted to impose a centralizing model on the islands in response to runaway resistance.[2]

After the Treaty of Paris and the British cession of East Florida to Spain, the Bahama

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Islands stood at a unique crossroads of the Atlantic World—southeast of Spanish Florida, northeast of Spanish Cuba, and north of French Saint Domingue. The British colonial archipelago was connected to its much more commercially successful cousin, Jamaica, through a strait between Cuba and Saint Domingue, and within the archipelago, the central islands of New Providence, Eleuthera, and Harbor Island held the highest populations in the colony, mostly displaced British Loyalists (Turner 14). After the War for American Independence, the Bahama Islands became a colonial destination for both white and black Loyalists (Curry 20-23).[3] Although thousands of African and African-descended persons fled to the British lines during the War for American Independence, most African and African-descended individuals who arrived at the Bahama Islands from the former-British North American colonies arrived enslaved (Frey 173, 326; Jasanoff 216). Resistance to slavery, however, continued in the postwar era as hundreds of enslaved individuals chose to defy their enslaver's ideas of where they belonged and instead escaped to occupy other spaces, either by land or sea.

Enslavers seeking to capture and re-enslave runaways perceived the Bahamian geography according to a centralizing model, and in this centralizing model, they employed inter- and intra-island communication to extend their grasp beyond their immediate location. These communication networks appeared within the *Bahama Gazette* advertisements whenever the "Subscriber" cited another person as a location for returning escaped human property. On June 17th, 1789, three African slaves named James, Jack, and Qua reappropriated "a small Boat" and fled from James Wallace's plantation "on the West-End of Cat-Island" (Chambers 13-14). James and Jack were formerly enslaved by Wallace while Qua was listed as "the Property of James Hepburn, Esq." On June 25th, Wallace sent an advertisement describing

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the three runaways and accompanying payment for their capture to the *Bahama Gazette*, which published it on July 11th, almost one month after their escape. In the advertisement, Wallace explained that the three runaways hoped to "get to Eleuthera," the island directly north of Cat-Island, "or some other Island." James, Jack, and Qua's escape was therefore an inter-island event, and in his attempt to capture and re-enslave the three men, Wallace employed inter-island communication. Wallace ended the advertisement with the promise that "whoever will take [James, Jack, and Qua] up and deliver them to the Subscriber at Cat-Island, or to Mr. John McKenzie in Nassau, will be handsomely rewarded, and all charges paid" (Chambers 13-4). The escape of James, Jack, and Qua from Cat-Island to another Bahamian locale forced James Wallace to utilize the inter-island communication networks which extended the grasp of enslavers beyond their immediate plantation, and these communication networks operated as one part in the enslavers' centralizing model of geography. Within runaway advertisements, these networks appear most frequently after formerly enslaved African or African-descended individuals risked an escape that stretched beyond their currently occupied island. Runaway resistance, therefore, influenced enslavers' constructions of geographical perceptions and revealed communication networks throughout the Bahama Islands.

Intra-island communication between island residents and the Subscriber expanded the enslavers' reach on their island of residence. In an advertisement published on June 10th, 1786, Robert Johnston mentioned that his formerly enslaved runaway, "a very artful and sensible" man named London, had been "seen near Mr. Bradfore's Plantation to the Westward" of Nassau (Chambers 8). Johnston also explained that London had formerly been "taken up" on the very same plantation, a reference to another escape made by London. Johnston did not

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reveal who shared the information of London's whereabouts with him, but his inclusion of London's last known sighting suggested inter-island communication on New Providence (Chambers 8). Similarly, on November 2nd, 1794, Robert Lightfoot placed an advertisement for a formerly enslaved man "named Charles." Charles escaped a week before the *Bahama Gazette* published Lightfoot's advertisement, and according to Lightfoot, Charles had "frequently been seen at Nights about Town and in the Eastern District" of Nassau (Chambers 34). Like the previous runaway notice, this advertisement does not mention who notified Lightfoot of Charles' appearance "about Town and in the Eastern District." Regardless, this phrase reveals that enslavers seeking to return their formerly enslaved human property to places under their control communicated with other island residents, especially those seeking to profit off the re-enslavement of runaways. These hints of inter-island communication, however, only appear due to the journeys of runaways like London and Charles, who resisted their former enslaver's geographical perceptions. Rather than remain in spaces constructed by their enslavers, London and Charles instead chose to escape. By seeking out, creating, and occupying spaces of resistance, African and African-descended runaways contested European and Euro-American perceptions of space within the Bahama Islands.

After failing to control the movement of their enslaved property within their plantation or residence, enslavers attempted to limit the movement of runaways to their immediate island. In February of 1791, "four miles Eastward of Nassau," an African-descended man named Emanuel escaped Samuel Kemp's House. Emanuel was no stranger to maritime knowledge. According to Kemp, Emanuel had "been bred to the sea" and had recently returned from a voyage to Jamaica (Chambers 22). In the context of Emanuel's aquatic experience, Kemp's

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warning at the advertisement's end cautioning "all Masters of Vessels" from "harbouring, entertaining, employing, or carrying off the said Runaway" held significant weight (Chambers 22). Soon after returning from a Jamaica-bound trip, Emanuel had chosen to resist enslavement in Kemp's house, and Kemp assumed that Emanuel would utilize his skill set as a sailor and seek both employment and freedom by the sea.[4] Kemp therefore attempted to limit Emanuel's movement to the island of New Providence, keeping him landlocked.

On January 28th, 1794, John Fergusson expressed a similar anxiety to Samuel Kemp's over a man named Belfast, who had escaped Fergusson over a week earlier. Since Fergusson described Belfast as "a good Sailor," he suspected that Belfast had been "carried off in some vessel for America" or "employed on board of some of the Droghers [*sic*] among these Islands" (Chambers 30). Fergusson had already failed to limit Belfast's mobility to New Providence, so he offered a reward not for Belfast's capture, but for information about the identity of Belfast's accomplices. Enslavers' efforts to keep formerly enslaved runaways landlocked, especially when these runaways commanded maritime skills, reveal a major anxiety in enslavers' attempt to limit mobility within the Bahama Islands. Subscribers seeking to capture and re-enslave runaways not only utilized inter- and intra-island communication to learn and share the potential location of runaways, but they also included warnings against "carrying off" runaways to try to limit their mobility to the land.

Although enslavers utilized inter- and intra-island communication networks to extend their reach beyond their immediate surroundings and issued warnings to keep formerly enslaved runaways landlocked, these steps only occurred after African and African-descended individuals resisted the geographic limits of enslavement. Enslavers asserted their own

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construction of geographical perceptions, a “centralizing model” with their residence as the center, only after runaways resisted this spatial construction. Runaways instead carved out their own spaces throughout the Bahama Islands, and these spaces stood as places of resistance against European and Euro-American perceptions of geography.

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End Notes

1. This paper is an excerpt from my developing honors thesis, which examines different modes of racial construction throughout the British Caribbean, specifically the Bahama Islands and Jamaica, during the Age of Revolutions. This portion is from my thesis's first chapter, in which I argue that perceptions of geography influenced and disseminated ideas about race throughout the British Caribbean.

2. For a multi-media project that interrogates how free and enslaved men, women, and children experienced the human landscape of Jamaica, see Newman. For other multimedia investigations of the interplay between resistance and geography, see Brown and Annette.

3. For the postwar diaspora to England, Sierra Leone, and Australia, see Pybus.

4. Although Kemp does not further explain Emanuel's maritime skill set, marine occupations often enabled enslaved African or African-descended individuals to labor under conditions that challenged their land-based social status as slaves. For more on how maritime occupations offered opportunities for enslaved individuals, see Dawson.

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