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The Runaway Class: An Experiment in Digital History

Peer-Reviewed Article

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Sancho disappeared from Boston without warning in September 1807. Enslaved in Mississippi, he had accompanied Revolutionary War hero and aspiring cotton capitalist Winthrop Sargent on a sojourn to the latter's ancestral home in Massachusetts. In an advertisement for his capture, Sargent described Sancho as an "accomplished servant" who was "thirty years of age, about 5 feet high, very black complexion, good teeth, not corpulent, but well formed, and of erect position of body & a *fast walker*."² As governor of Mississippi Territory between 1798 and 1801, Sargent had personally crafted the region's fugitive slave code, and his indignation at Sancho's


¹ This article is based on my presentation at the Enslaved.org conference at Michigan State University in March 2019. I am grateful to the organizers and participants. I would like to thank my students for their inspiration, insight, tough criticism, and hard work. Although the arguments and reflections presented in this article are solely my own, the students who constructed and contributed to the database in myriad ways deserve full credit for any positive change or intellectual advances that may result from their efforts. I would also like to thank the faculty and staff who supported my well-being and livelihood during this period, especially Pam Patterson, Trip Kirkpatrick, and Thomas Thurston at Yale, Patricia Hill and Gary Shaw at Wesleyan, and Jean Bauer and Natalia Ermolaev at the Center for Digital Humanities at Princeton.

² Winthrop Sargent, advertisement for Sancho, *Columbian Centinel*, September 23, 1807. Emphasis in the original. For a complete transcription, see Henry M. Brooks, ed., *The Olden Time Series*, vol. 4 (Boston: Ticknor and Company, 1886), 90–91. On the accompanying silhouette, see Asma Naeem et al., *Black Out: Silhouettes Then and Now* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 103; Jennifer Van Horn, *Portraits of Resistance: Activating Art During Slavery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 98-100.

Boston, Sept. 21, 1807.

A GOOD LIKENESS OF SANCHO,
A NEGRO

MAN, thirty years of age, about 5 feet high, very black complexion, good teeth, not corpulent, but well formed, and of erect position of body & a fast walker, WHO absented himself (supposed to have been inveigled away by some artful villains for their own use and benefit) upon the Evening of the 17th inst. from his Master, WINTHROP SARGENT, late Governor of the Mississippi Territory. He had learned the trade of a Barber, and is in every respect a most accomplished servant for a gentleman or a family; was born and educated in his Master's house; endeared to *him*, his *mistress*, and his own *wife* and *children*, as well as the numerous blacks of his Master's Plantations, by long, affectionate, and faithful services, and ere this *solitary* instance of malconduct, there was not a single doubt entertained that the attachments were mutual and inviolable. If he voluntarily returns to the service of his Master, he shall be received with wonted kindness and affection, but no expense will be spared to punish to the utmost limits of the law, all persons who may be accessory in harboring or concealing him, and the sum of FIFTY DOLLARS shall be paid to any person who will apprehend and deliver him to his Master, or in his absence to Mr. IGNATIUS SARGENT, in Boston; to Messrs. G & I ASPINWALL, in New-York; or Col. S HOBGDON, in Philadelphia;---or the sum of ONE HUNDRED DOLLARS for delivering him to Mr. DAVID UROUHART, Merchant, in N. Orleans.



WINTHROP SARGENT.

Fig. 1. Newspaper advertisement for Sancho published in Boston in 1807. Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution (npg.si.edu).

act of rebellion was palpable.³ “If he voluntarily returns to the service of his Master, he shall be received with wonted kindness and affection,” implored the advertisement, “but no expense will be spared to punish to the utmost limits of the law, all persons who may be accessory in harboring or concealing him.” A Harvard graduate with substantial commercial and political connections, Sargent activated a network of spies from Boston to New York, Philadelphia, and New Orleans in what amounted to a nationwide manhunt for his erstwhile valet. Unusually for a runaway notice, he also included a silhouette portrait of Sancho—probably the first such image to be used in this way.

Home to a small but influential free Black population, Boston was a popular conduit for runaways, and it is not difficult to imagine the fleet-footed Sancho taking advantage of the freedom and anonymity provided by the maritime city.⁴ A letter composed by Sargent’s sister, feminist literary icon Judith Sargent Murray, sheds additional light on the circumstances of his departure. According to Murray, Sancho fled while her brother was paralyzed with gout on the night before they were both scheduled to leave Massachusetts to return south. “No previous signs of his discontent were observed,” she wrote, “and he declared to some black men, with whom he was conversant, that he should in a few days return to the Mississippi Territory, where he has brothers, sisters, and a wife, and children, and that nothing should tempt him to leave a family, in which he enjoyed everything he wished.” He left behind a wardrobe worth over \$300, she added, “and went off in his shirt sleeves, without even a hat upon his head!” Murray suspected that he had been kidnapped or “fallen dead in the street,” but later changed her mind and helped to circulate her brother’s advertisement across Massachusetts Bay in an increasingly desperate attempt to apprehend the “ungrateful fellow.”⁵

Sargent continued to publish his notice for several weeks, probably at considerable cost, but to no avail. Beneath all of his public protestations about kindness and affection, he harbored no illusions about the men, women, and children he enslaved. “That we deprive them of the sacred Boon of Liberty is a Crime they can never forgive,” he admitted in an address to militia officers in Natchez in 1801. “Mild and humane Treatment may for a Time Continue them quiet,” he reasoned, “but can never fully Reconcile them to their situation.”⁶ Terrified that the Haitian Revolution would inspire antislavery insurgents across the continent, he helped transform Mississippi into a militarized surveillance state. Even so, revolts and desertions continued.⁷

³ *Sargent’s Code: A Collection of the Original Laws of the Mississippi Territory Enacted 1799-1800 by Governor Winthrop Sargent and the Territorial Judges* (Jackson, MS: Historical Records Survey, 1939), 47.

⁴ George Levesque, *Black Boston: African American Life and Culture in Urban America, 1750-1860* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994); Christopher Cameron, *To Plead Our Own Cause: African Americans in Massachusetts and the Making of the Antislavery Movement* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2014).

⁵ Judith Sargent Murray to “My Friend, my Sister,” October 5, 1807, Letter Book 14, Microfilm Reel 4, Judith Sargent Murray Papers (Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, MS). I am grateful to Lise Breen for this reference and for a lively discussion about Murray.

⁶ Dunbar Rowland (ed.), *The Mississippi Territorial Archives, 1798–1803*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Brandon Printing Company, 1905), 325.

⁷ Winthrop Sargent, broadside, November 16, 1800, Correspondence and Other Papers, Microfilm Reel 5, Winthrop Sargent Papers (Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, MA). A different version of this document can be found in Rowland, *Mississippi Territorial Archives*, 311–12. On surveillance and

Sancho likely knew about the Haitian example. Indeed, he may have known Deyaha Moussa, a Haitian refugee who lived with his enslaver's family in Boston and whose silhouette portrait resembles the one published in Sargent's advertisement.⁸

As the United States government prepared to abolish the transatlantic slave trade at the end of 1807, Sancho continued to evade his captors. It is likely that he did so for some time. "Strange, that I have never heard a word of *Sancho*," wrote one of Sargent's informants in Philadelphia, eight months after his escape.⁹ When Sargent completed his will shortly before his death in January 1820, he included no mention of the troublesome fugitive, apart from a derisory remark that all his slaves should be consulted on their "future owners."¹⁰ A self-styled poet, noted for his "Caesar-like dramatic eloquence," this time his words failed him.¹¹ Two-hundred years later, however, his newspaper advertisement remains in circulation. In a perverse echo of the act of commodification that rendered a person as property, extant copies sell at online auctions for thousands of dollars. One such copy now resides on the website of the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC, immortalized in digital code and shared across countless computer screens, the ultimate testament to Sancho's successful act of resistance.¹² Yet his narrative remains open-ended, a mass of unresolved questions and trailing ellipses. Despite his enduring fame, he continues to elude us.

counterinsurgency in Mississippi, see Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 209–43.

⁸ "Daddy Mousse" Silhouette, Box 3, Subseries 4, Perkins Family Papers (Boston Athenæum, Boston, MA); L. Vernon Briggs, *History and Genealogy of the Cabot Family, 1475–1927*, vol. 2 (Boston: Charles E. Goodspeed & Co., 1927), 489–490; Wayne William Tucker, "Update on Deyaha Moussa," *Eleven Names Project*, November 21, 2022,

<https://elevennames.substack.com/p/november-21-2022#update-on-deyaha-moussa>. For knowledge of Haiti, see Julius S. Scott, *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2018).

⁹ Samuel Hodgdon to Winthrop Sargent, May 28, 1808, Microfilm Reel 6, Sargent Papers. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁰ Winthrop Sargent, Codicil to Last Will and Testament, November 21, 1819, Microfilm Reel 7, Sargent Papers.

¹¹ Winthrop Sargent, *Boston: A Poem* (Boston: Joseph Nancrede, 1803); James J. Kirschke, "Sargent, Winthrop (01 May 1753–03 January 1820)," *American National Biography*, February 2000, <https://doi.org/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.article.0200277>.

¹² Sale 539, Lot 233, *PBA Galleries*, August 14, 2014,

<https://www.pbagalleries.com/view-auctions/catalog/id/338/lot/103639/Boston-ad-for-Mississippi-runaway-slave-with-rare-picture>; Sale 2377, Lot 27, *Swann Auction Galleries*, March 26, 2015,

<https://catalogue.swannalleries.com/Lots/auction-lot/SARGENT-WINTHROP-A-Good-Likeness-of-Sancho-a-Negro?saleno=2377&lotNo=27&refNo=700532>; Sale 23256, Lot 145, *Bonhams*, April 11, 2016,

<https://www.bonhams.com/auction/23256/lot/145/1807-likeness-of-an-african-american-in-a-newspaper-sargent-winthrop-1753-1820-columbian-centinel-boston-benjamin-russell-september-30-1807-no-2452/>;

"likely the first published portrait of a runaway slave in America," *The 19th Century Rare Book and Photograph Shop*, accessed June 20, 2023,

<https://www.19thshop.com/book/portrait-of-a-runaway-enslaved-man-titled-a-good-likeness-of-sancho/>;

"A Good Likeness of Sancho, a Negro," *National Portrait Gallery*, accessed June 20, 2023,

https://npg.si.edu/object/npg_NPG.2015.108.

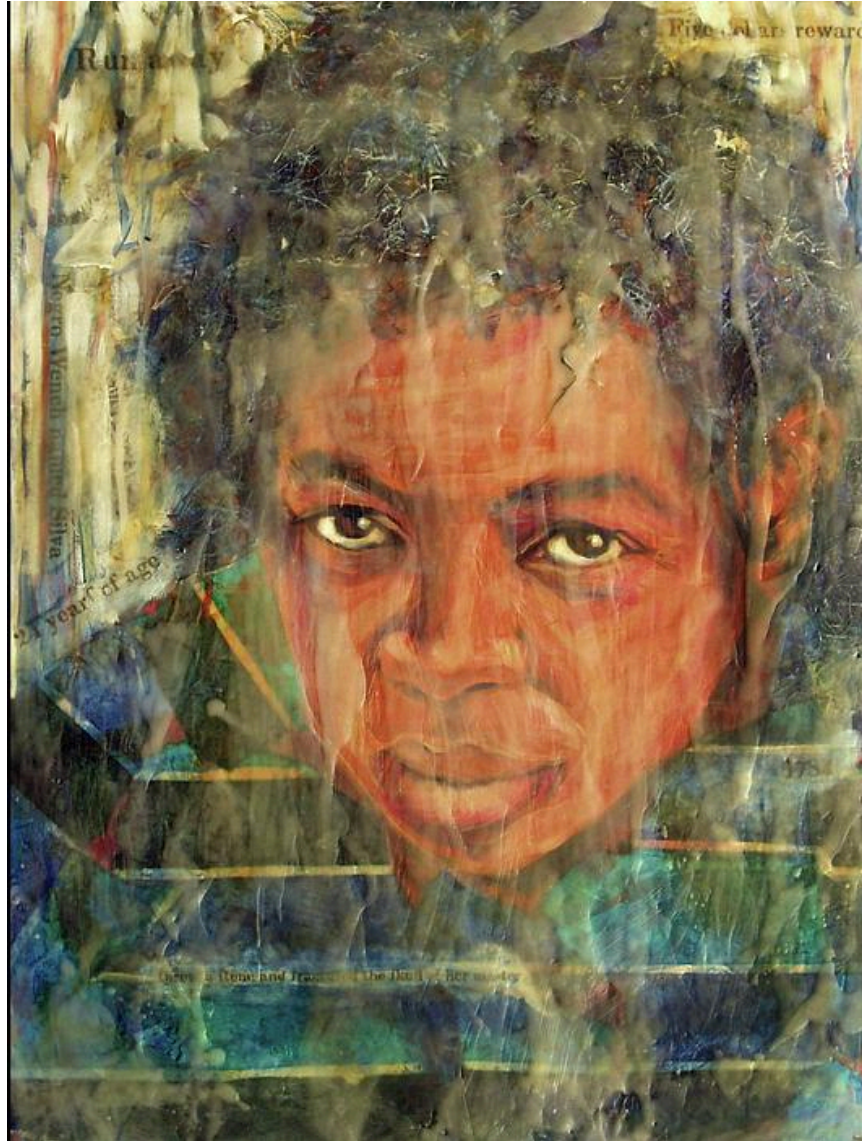


Fig. 2. "Runaway Silva" by Cora Marshall. Inspired by an advertisement in the *Connecticut Courant*, June 1784. Courtesy of the artist (coramarshallprints.com).

Sancho's story is extraordinary, but hardly unique. Newspaper advertisements for runaways were ubiquitous in colonial and antebellum America. In fact, they can be found throughout the world made by the Atlantic slave trade, in ancient European capitals and precarious African outposts, dynamic South American strongholds and bustling Caribbean ports, rural plantations and mercantile cities. Notices for escaped slaves, servants, soldiers, prisoners, husbands, and wives crowded the back pages of journals and gazettes alongside similar announcements for wandering horses, cows, and assorted livestock. As a genre, these documents are both deeply problematic and oddly beguiling. Rich in detail and brimming with data, each advertisement tells a story in microcosm. They have fueled a vast secondary literature of edited anthologies and

scholarly monographs.¹³ They have inspired a cultural effusion of portrait series, poems, songs, films, and graphic novels.¹⁴ And they are often used in classroom activities.¹⁵ With the advent of new technologies, it is increasingly easy to mine databases of old publications and to collect and curate this material online.

In Spring 2018, I was fortunate to be able to design and teach an undergraduate course that examined runaways both as historical subjects and as digital artifacts. Based on earlier experiments scattered over multiple courses at four universities, it was my first attempt to tackle the subject in depth across an entire semester. An interdisciplinary seminar, it combined approaches from critical race and gender studies, disability studies, memory studies, social history, environmental history, digital history, and public history. Our weekly meetings investigated the category and meaning of fugitivity in different locations and time periods and across a wide spectrum of unfreedom. Where did fugitive notices appear and how were they used? What information do they reveal about their authors? What information (if anything) do they reveal about their subjects? What are the potential benefits and pitfalls of placing this material on the open web? What does it mean to present fugitive history digitally? We looked at newspaper advertisements for Native Americans, Africans, Europeans, sailors, slaves, prisoners, husbands, wives, children, and transgender individuals. The major goal of the course was to produce an interactive digital database of runaway advertisements for use by other students and researchers. The result, tentatively entitled *Runaway New England*, is as flawed and incomplete as its source material. At the same time, it offers a number of useful lessons for future work in the field.

¹³ A very truncated list of recent examples includes David Waldstreicher, *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery, and the American Revolution* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004); Antonio Bly, *Escaping Bondage: A Documentary History of Runaway Slaves in Eighteenth-Century New England, 1700–1789* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012); Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge* (New York: 37 Ink/Atria, 2017); Sharon Block, *Colonial Complexions: Race and Bodies in Eighteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018); Stefanie Hunt-Kennedy, *Between Fitness and Death: Disability and Slavery in the Caribbean* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020); Karen Cook Bell, *Running from Bondage: Enslaved Women and Their Remarkable Fight for Freedom in Revolutionary America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Simon P. Newman, *Freedom Seekers: Escaping from Slavery in Restoration London* (London: University of London Press, 2021).

¹⁴ Cora Marshall, "Runaway! Going, Going, Gone," mixed media painting series, accessed June 20, 2023, <http://coramarshallprints.com/collections/runaway+going+going+gone>; "Songs in Flight," *Sparks and Wiry Cries*, accessed June 20, 2023, <https://www.sparksandwirycries.org/songs-in-flight>; 1745, directed by Gordon Napier (Compact Pictures, 2017); *Runaway*, directed by Daniel Fries (Historic Hudson Valley, 2018); Marcelo D'Saete, *Run For It: Stories of Slaves Who Fought for their Freedom* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2017); Warren Pleece, *Freedom Bound: Escaping Slavery in Scotland* (Glasgow: BHP Comics, 2018); Fahad Al-Amoudi, Kate Birch, and Simon P. Newman, "Runaways London: Historical Research, Archival Silences and Creative Voices," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 32 (2022): 223–239.

¹⁵ Matthew Mason and Rita G. Koman, "Complicating Slavery: Teaching with Runaway Slave Advertisements," *OAH Magazine of History* 17, no. 3 (2003): 31–34; Thom Thacker and Michael A. Lord, "Reaching Between the Lines," *Rethinking Schools* 21, no. 2 (2006/2007): <https://rethinkingschools.org/articles/reaching-between-the-lines/>; Elizabeth Rose, "Teaching About Slavery with Runaway Slave Advertisements," *Connecticut History Review* 46, no. 1 (2007): 117–127.

The product of several years of experimentation and improvisation in the classroom, the *Runaway New England* database is significant for at least three reasons. First, it has a distinct regional focus. Most of the pioneering, high-profile digital projects pertaining to the history of enslavement and resistance produced over the past few decades focus on the American South or the countries and regions of what is sometimes termed the Global South. That focus is entirely appropriate and justified. Yet, as a recent series of eloquent and iconoclastic history books insist, slavery was essential to the Northeastern United States. Indeed, it makes increasingly little sense to speak of a rigidly separate North and South or to draw a clear boundary line between so-called “slave societies” and “societies with slaves.”¹⁶ Geographically expansive databases such as *Freedom on the Move* and *Slavery Adverts 250* have made a tremendous contribution to teaching and scholarship in this vein.¹⁷ By placing emphasis on the early American North, in its own modest way, our class project helps to reinterpret a familiar genre and to resituate racial slavery as a national, rather than a sectional institution.

Second, although centered on the experiences of people who escaped enslavement, the database incorporates a wide spectrum of freedom-seeking migrants. Over time, the project grew to include runaway bond slaves and servants, prisoners and soldiers, children and apprentices, husbands and wives. Including these advertisements in our database was controversial, because not all forms of bonded labor are equal. As a long list of distinguished scholars have demonstrated, racialized, chattel slavery was the foundational institution of the modern Americas and fueled the rise of a unified global economy.¹⁸ Americans of African descent, in addition to indigenous and other colonized people, continue to struggle against a complex constellation of oppressions and exclusions, racism, violence, and super-exploitation to a degree far beyond the experience of those of European descent. A recent surge of material on so-called “white slavery,” much of it based on outright fabrications and falsifications and tied

¹⁶ A proper list should begin with Lorenzo Johnston Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620–1776* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942). More recent examples include Anne Farrow, Joel Lang, and Jenifer Frank, *Complicity: How the North Promoted, Prolonged, and Profited from Slavery* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2005); C. S. Manegold, *Ten Hills Farm: The Forgotten History of Slavery in the North* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Allegra di Bonaventura, *For Adam's Sake: A Family Saga in Colonial New England* (New York: Liveright, 2013); Harvey Amani Whitfield, *The Problem of Slavery in Early Vermont, 1777–1810* (Barre: Vermont Historical Society, 2014); Christy Clark-Pujara, *Dark Work: The Business of Slavery in Rhode Island* (New York: New York University Press, 2016); Wendy Warren, *New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization in Early America* (New York: Liveright, 2016); Jared Ross Hardesty, *Black Lives, Native Lands, White Worlds: A History of Slavery in New England* (Amherst: Bright Leaf, 2019). The distinction between “slave societies” and “societies with slaves” was popularized by Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998).

¹⁷ *Freedom on the Move: Rediscovering the Stories of Self-Liberating People*, accessed June 20, 2023, <https://freedomonthemove.org>; *Slavery Adverts 250*, accessed June 20, 2023, <https://twitter.com/SlaveAdverts250>.

¹⁸ For example, Gerald Horne, *The Apocalypse of Settler Colonialism: The Roots of Slavery, White Supremacy, and Capitalism in Seventeenth-Century North America and the Caribbean* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2018); Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021); Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 3rd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

to various white nationalist movements, seeks to diminish the special status of racial slavery as well as undermine associated claims for reparative justice.¹⁹ Yet providing comparative data, and placing it in its proper historical context, helps to combat this kind of politically motivated misappropriation.

As my students and I began to read and process entire issues of local newspapers, we learned that notices for individuals escaping enslavement did not exist in a vacuum. Important information could be lost by segregating these sources from their broader context. In fact, different groups and varieties of runaways occasionally intersected, shared, and collaborated with each other. By bringing these previously disparate categories of individuals together in a digital format for the first time, our interface revealed a hidden connection and continuum between African American chattel slavery—the paramount and most enduring institution—and other modes of unfree labor. In line with recent work on the subject, our results suggest that the phenomenon of the runaway is an exceptionally fluid and recurring theme in the history of capitalist modernity.²⁰

Third, and most important, the database was researched, conceived, designed, and constructed by a diverse group of undergraduate students. Although I did not realize it at the time, I was practicing a form of “teaching-led research” that has become increasingly popular among science educators, in particular.²¹ Instead of a traditional seminar paper, which many students hate writing and many instructors hate grading, and which usually gets dumped in the trash bin at the end of the term, I wanted my students to collaborate on a project that would be of lasting value. Instead of passive consumers of knowledge and technology, I wanted them to become active participants and coworkers in knowledge creation. The results captured some of the excitement and energy of student-led research in digital history. The experiment also underscored some of the challenges and limitations of database work in the classroom. Questions of scope and content, practical concerns about accessibility and preservation, and ethical debates over methods and dissemination shaped the evolution of the project over multiple iterations.

The idea for the database was not pre-ordained. Rather, it emerged organically, based on several years of classroom experience with dozens of students across four different universities. It began with a seminar on slavery in early America, which I taught as an adjunct instructor while in graduate school. One day in class, I asked my students to explore the major commercial

¹⁹ Jerome S. Handler and Matthew C. Reilly, “Contesting ‘White Slavery’ in the Caribbean: Enslaved Africans and European Indentured Servants in Seventeenth-Century Barbados,” *New West Indian Guide* 91, no.1-2 (2017): 30-55.

²⁰ Marcus Rediker, Titas Chakraborty, and Matthias van Rossum, eds., *A Global History of Runaways: Workers, Mobility, and Capitalism, 1600–1850* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019). On the “continuum of unfreedom,” see Jared Ross Hardesty, *Unfreedom: Slavery and Dependence in Eighteenth-Century Boston* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

²¹ For example, P. S. Blackawton et al., “Blackawton Bees,” *Biology Letters* 7, no. 2 (2011): 168-72; Tony Harland, “Teaching to Enhance Research,” *Higher Education Research and Development* 35, no. 3 (2016): 461-72.

historical newspaper databases (Gale, ProQuest, and Readex) and select runaway advertisements that were especially intriguing. I then asked them to research their source's historical context using a mixture of digital and analog resources. Finally, I asked them to compose imaginative biographies of the individuals involved. This developed into a teaching strategy that I called the "runaway class" that I was able to refine and apply in other settings.²²

The possibilities for microhistorical investigation and reconstruction were seemingly endless. What information do these advertisements reveal or conceal? To what extent are they believable or unbelievable? How do you find someone who does not want to be found? The antiquated language and oblique references required students to develop their skills as digital detectives. In some cases, the individuals, places, and events mentioned in the text were easily identifiable and could be traced through a maze of manuscript collections, genealogy forums, and local histories. In other cases, students had to use empathy, imagination, and secondary literature to construct plausible scenarios and conditional statements—what Saidiya Hartman calls "critical fabulation."²³ This was a familiar struggle with the archive of slavery, and I soon realized that we needed a way to record and preserve these ad hoc activities.

Offered the chance to teach an undergraduate course focused specifically on digital history, I seized the opportunity and, together with my students, decided to create an original database of runaway advertisements gathered from newspapers in colonial and early national Connecticut. Again, the idea grew organically. We examined a number of slavery databases, alongside a panoply of other digital history projects, throughout the first half of the term. Serendipity, geographical convenience, and institutional resources played an important role. I happened to be teaching in Connecticut, home of the *Hartford Courant*, the oldest continuously published newspaper in the United States. The *Courant* was directly involved in the regional slave economy, and full-text searchable copies of most issues, in addition to several other local newspapers, were readily available through subscription databases.²⁴ The project also allowed me to draw on my academic background researching and teaching about abolitionism and the Underground Railroad. Most importantly, it would be open-ended and improvisational. The project would depend on working collectively to achieve a common goal.

Informed consent and student ownership of the results were essential. If I had access to the Student Collaborators' Bill of Rights, developed the following year at UCLA, it would have been required reading. Instead, following tried and true practices of agile software development, we

²² Joseph Yannielli, "My Runaway Class," *Digital Histories at Yale*, February 8, 2013, <https://digitalhistories.yctf.org/2013/02/08/my-runaway-class/>. Syllabi for some of these courses can be accessed at <https://github.com/jyannielli/syllabi>.

²³ Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1-14.

²⁴ Jesse Leavenworth and Kevin Canfield, "Courant Complicity, An Old Wrong," *Hartford Courant*, July 4, 2000; Liz Petry, "Chapter Five: Slavery and The Courant," *Hartford Courant*, September 29, 2002; Farrow, Lang, and Frank, *Complicity*, xvii-xix. On the pivotal role of newspapers in "slavery's capitalism," see Jordan E. Taylor, "Enquire of the Printer: Newspaper Advertising and the Moral Economy of the North American Slave Trade, 1704–1807," *Early American Studies* 18, no. 3 (2020): 287-323.

made up the rules as we went along.²⁵ Through a process of consensus and reflection on our individual strengths and weaknesses, we divided into four groups: content, design, outreach, and accessibility. The content team performed research and spearheaded the transcriptions and data entry for the advertisements. The design team focused on the content management system, interface, and visual theme for the public-facing site. The outreach team created a Twitter account to document our progress, communicated with news outlets, and solicited input from outside experts.²⁶ The accessibility officer focused on compliance with World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) standards and best practices and investigated issues of copyright and sustainability. I served as project manager, coordinating the various tasks. All activities were recorded and shared on Google Docs, which created a sense of mutual accountability. Drawing on principles of universal design, I asked everyone to participate in a way best suited to their own skill-level, unique perspectives, and individual interests.²⁷ Fortunately, the mix of computer science, social science, and humanities majors in the course allowed for an eclectic range of enthusiasm and expertise.

As in my earlier class, student researchers were captivated by the source material. Consider the transcontinental drama of a tattooed Native American military veteran named Charles:

TWENTY DOLLARS Reward. RAN-AWAY from Col. Israel Putnam, on the Evening of the 18th of August Instant, a Spanish Indian Servant, named CHARLES, about 27 Years of Age, about five Feet ten Inches high, has long straight black Hair, small Eyes, high Cheek Bones, pretty slender made, speaks French well, also a little Indian and broken English; he has a small spot in the forehead prick't in with Powder, and on one of his Arms has a Cross and the figure of a Cock, also prick't in with Powder; He carried with him a blue strait-bodied Coat lin'd with red, and a Waste coat of the same, a nankeen Waste coat, one pair of leather-Breeches, one pair of red knit Ditto, one white linnen Shirt, two tow Ditto, two pair of mix't worsted Stockings, two pair of Shoes, an old blue surtout Coat trim'd with blue, & yellow Buttons speck'd with Steel, a yellow button and gold loop on his Hat, is something pitted with the Small Pox, he is more than common White, 'tis supposed that there is a Squaw, part English gone with him, and that they carried off two or three Soldiers Blankets with them, and also a French Fowling Piece Iron mounted, but has a Silver Sight and thumb-Piece, and likewise a long Knife. He came from Canada, and was formerly the property of Col. Lockhorn of Montreal. 'Tis supposed he took a forged Pass with him. Whoever will take up and convey said Servant to his Master at Pomfret, or secure him in any of his Majesty's Goals and give Notice thereof so that his Master shall have him again, shall receive the above Reward of Twenty Dollars, and all necessary Charges, paid by me

²⁵ Haley Di Pressi et al., "A Student Collaborators' Bill of Rights," *UCLA HumTech*, June 8, 2015, <https://humtech.ucla.edu/news/a-student-collaborators-bill-of-rights/>; Spencer D.C. Keralis, "Disrupting Labor in Digital Humanities; or, The Classroom Is Not Your Crowd," in *Disrupting the Digital Humanities*, ed. Dorothy Kim and Jesse Stommel (Earth: Punctum Books, 2018), 273–94; Kent Beck et al., "Manifesto for Agile Software Development," February 2001, <http://agilemanifesto.org>.

²⁶ Runaway Connecticut (@WesRunawayCT), April 2014, <https://twitter.com/WesRunawayCT>.

²⁷ Kristin H. Robinson and Anne Meyer, "Doing History the Universal Design for Learning Way," in *Universal Design for Learning in the Classroom: Practical Applications*, ed. Tracey E. Hall, Anne Meyer, and David H. Rose (New York: Guilford Press, 2012), 90–105.

Israel Putnam.
Pomfret, Aug. 20, 1764.²⁸

Colonel Putnam became a hero of the American Revolution and is memorialized in statues and legends. Known to those he enslaved as “Massa Putnam,” his biography celebrates his alleged kindness toward his human property.²⁹ Yet, through this advertisement, Putnam unwittingly offers an alternative narrative that centers a multicultural couple struggling to navigate a complex imperial landscape of war and dispossession. Documents like this suggested a broader geography of captivity connecting New England and Canada. They also generated useful questions and instructive overlap with projects examining indigenous enslavement in the Americas.³⁰

I encouraged my students to treat the advertisements as incremental contributions to an ongoing conversation and to avoid reading them in isolation or extracting them from their wider context. Authors imbibed and reacted to each other’s notices. For the most part, the process was subtle: a borrowed word or a similar phrase. Boilerplate language, inserted at the end of some advertisements, warned against harboring or aiding fugitives and hinted at clandestine support networks—the historical foundation of what would become known as the Underground Railroad. Tempers flared when neighbor turned against neighbor. A rum merchant in Wallingford, Connecticut, suspected that a man he enslaved was “concealed in this Town by some evil minded Person.”³¹ Jokes or sarcastic comments exposed the performative nature of the descriptions, for example, when authors complained of someone who “walked away” because they were “too lazy to run.”³² Sometimes it was difficult to discern the line between a genuine advertisement and satire or ridicule. “CÆSAR a Negro Fellow noted in Town by having no Legs, is supposed to be strolling about the Country,” stated one perplexing example from colonial Boston.³³

Occasionally, the latent dialogue between advertisers and readers became manifest. Such was the case with a letter to the editor of the *Western Star* in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Urging the

²⁸ Israel Putnam, advertisement for Charles, *Connecticut Gazette*, August 24, 1764, <https://runaway.fairuse.org/runawayct/items/show/5404>.

²⁹ William Farrand Livingston, *Israel Putnam: Pioneer, Ranger, and Major-General, 1718-1790*. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1901), 127.

³⁰ Charmaine A. Nelson, “A ‘tone of voice peculiar to New-England’: Fugitive Slave Advertisements and the Heterogeneity of Enslaved People of African Descent in Eighteenth-Century Quebec,” *Current Anthropology* 61, no. S22 (2020): 1–14; Linford D. Fisher, et al., *Stolen Relations: Recovering Stories of Indigenous Enslavement in the Americas*, accessed June 20, 2023, <https://indigenousslavery.org>.

³¹ Hezekiah Johnson, advertisement for Charles, *Connecticut Journal*, October 20, 1779, <https://runaway.fairuse.org/runawayct/items/show/5298>.

³² Abel Moses, advertisement for Curtis Crow, *Connecticut Courant*, May 27, 1828, <https://runaway.fairuse.org/runawayct/items/show/5009>.

³³ Advertisement for Caesar, *Boston News-Letter*, August 24, 1769. This ad occasionally surfaces online, where it is assumed to be genuine. For example, J. L. Bell, “Caesar: ‘noted in Town by having no Legs,’” *Boston 1775*, June 30, 2006, <https://boston1775.blogspot.com/2006/06/caesar-noted-in-town-by-having-no-legs.html>.

public to exercise caution, the anonymous author exposed a fraudulent runaway notice used to abduct and enslave a local man across state lines. The author disavowed any abolitionist intent, however, reminding readers “to give every assistance in detecting slaves that have *really* escaped from their owners.”³⁴ The number of false or misleading advertisements is impossible to know. But as the New England states began to pass gradual emancipation laws at the end of the eighteenth century, the danger of kidnapping or sale to slaveholding regions likely increased. Judith Sargent Murray’s initial assumption that Sancho had been kidnapped reflected the prevalence of this practice. Although free Black workers and sailors were the usual targets, the possibility remains that Sancho was carried away against his will.³⁵

Some authors appealed directly to runaways, offering concessions or enticements if they returned. “If said negro hears of this advertisement and shall return to his duty within one month from the date,” wrote a conciliatory slaveholder, “he shall be received into his master’s service, without corporal punishment.”³⁶ In rare cases, those with the means and ability replied in print to their advertisers. Elisabeth Green of Enfield, Connecticut, conjured a vivid picture of her abusive husband. “I have reason to lament my folly in marrying him,” she announced, “but not for leaving him.” Mocking the notices issued by husbands for their wayward spouses, she offered forty dollars reward, plus necessary charges, to anyone who would keep him away from her.³⁷ Encountering such examples, it was impossible to ignore the intimate and influential ties between systems of patriarchy and systems of slavery and servitude.³⁸

Advertisements for women were often perfunctory, and those for racialized or unaccompanied women could be frustratingly short. Witness the case of Silva, who absconded after a violent altercation with her enslaver:

RUN away from the Subscriber the 17th instant, a Negro Wench, named SILVA, about 24 years of age, smallish size, thick and well made, had on and took with her 2 brown Skirts and striped short Gowns. Whoever will take up and secure said Wench and give information to the Subscriber, shall have Five Dollars Reward and charges paid by, ELIJAH HENSDALE.
Farmington, June 19, 1784.

³⁴ Letter to Loring Andrews, *Western Star*, February 14, 1792,

<https://runaway.fairuse.org/runawayct/items/show/5575>. The emphasis is mine.

³⁵ Benjamin D. Remillard, “‘What then are our Lives and Lebeties worth’: The 18th Century Kidnapping Case that Shook Boston,” *The Beehive*, January 21, 2022,

<https://www.masshist.org/beehiveblog/2022/01/what-then-are-our-lives-and-lebeties-worth-the-18th-century-kidnapping-case-that-shook-boston/>.

³⁶ Edward Allen, advertisement for Newport and an unnamed woman, *Connecticut Courant*, July 2, 1771, <https://runaway.fairuse.org/runawayct/items/show/4474>.

³⁷ Elisabeth Green, advertisement for James Green, *Connecticut Gazette*, April 28, 1775, <https://runaway.fairuse.org/runawayct/items/show/5274>.

³⁸ Kirsten Sword, *Wives Not Slaves: Patriarchy and Modernity in the Age of Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

N. B. Said Wench before she run away threw a stone and fractured the skull of her master and otherwise much wounded him.³⁹

One is left to speculate as to the proximate cause of this bold act of self-defense. The comparative lack of detail in these documents reflected the gendered assumptions of the authors and provided important evidence of the intersection of multiple and overlapping identities and oppressions.⁴⁰

We also discovered a small but significant sample of individuals who assumed a new gender identity to evade their captors—in some cases for extended periods of time. There was Clara, spotted “at two public houses, dressed in men's cloaths”; Jenny, detained while “travelling in man's cloaths towards Boston”; and Nance, whose choice of male attire would “require a more close Examination.”⁴¹ These and similar narratives testify to the depth and persistence of the surveillance state created by enslavers, as well as a queer history of transgression and subversion that scholars are only beginning to explore.⁴²

In my digital history course, students were not just researching and transcribing these advertisements—they were designing and constructing an entirely new archival apparatus. We fully embraced the “DIY History” ethos and used the open-source Omeka platform to manage our content, precisely because it enables this kind of collective, multimodal engagement.⁴³ We experimented with georeferencing and geolocation, linked data, and topic modeling. We used Neatline and Simile to create interactive maps and timelines that charted runaway patterns over space and time. We made all of our material freely available to copy, remix, or expand under a Creative Commons license. We also tried using microphones and speech-to-text software to transcribe content. We read the runaway notices out loud, similar to the way they were often read aloud by contemporaries, and they came alive in a way that was fearsome and immediate. Where students lacked the requisite skills or knowledge, I stepped in to provide historiographical context or custom code. The latter included a JavaScript lightbox, an academic citation plugin, and a Python script for parsing location data, all of which are also freely available.⁴⁴ The end result was the *Runaway Connecticut* database. Although rough around the edges, the database was a proof of concept. And it provided a framework for future experimentation.

³⁹ Elijah Hensdale, advertisement for Silva, *Connecticut Courant*, June 22, 1784, <https://runaway.fairuse.org/runawayct/items/show/4723>.

⁴⁰ Billy G. Smith, “Black Women Who Stole Themselves in Eighteenth-Century America,” in *Inequality in Early America*, ed. Carla Gardina Pestana and Sharon V. Salinger (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999), 134–59.

⁴¹ Gabriel Sistare, advertisement for Clara, *Connecticut Gazette*, September 3, 1795, <https://runaway.fairuse.org/runawayct/items/show/5587>; advertisement for Jenny, *Connecticut Courant*, July 27, 1784, <https://runaway.fairuse.org/runawayct/items/show/4727>; Simeon Dakin Jr., advertisement for Nance, *Litchfield Monitor*, April 17, 1799, <https://runaway.fairuse.org/runawayct/items/show/5561>.

⁴² Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 31-62; C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 55-97.

⁴³ T. Mills Kelly, *Teaching History in the Digital Age* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 102-25.

⁴⁴ For example, “Runaway-Cite,” Omeka plugin, <https://github.com/jyannielli/Runaway-Cite>.

The public launch of the database was a success and in feedback forms during and after the term, students praised the reading material, describing our class conversations and interventions as “interesting and thought provoking.” A few respondents were uneasy with the lack of strict guidelines for the final project. Some enjoyed working in groups, while others complained that they felt restricted by their group and wanted to work independently.⁴⁵ Released with relatively little fanfare, news of the project spread slowly and informally. Within a few years, however, I started receiving feedback from teachers who were using the database in their classrooms as well as emails from local reporters, historical societies, genealogists, and artists interested in the advertisements. The project also began to appear in citations in mainstream academic publications.⁴⁶ When our domain name changed due to forces beyond my control, irate users got in touch to find out what had happened.

Sustainability was the most difficult challenge to overcome. As digital historians have pointed out since the dawn of the field, the Internet is not forever. Innumerable valuable databases and artifacts have disappeared or become inoperable, and preserving and maintaining projects indefinitely requires large expenditures of time, money, and technical expertise.⁴⁷ As a graduate student adjunct with very little influence, power, or resources, I had difficulty convincing my university to invest in the long-term health of the database. Although, in the end, I was able to secure a limited agreement to preserve an archived version of the site, its status remains precarious. And as I moved between institutions on the contingent labor market, it became troublesome to preserve continuity in the project—an increasingly common concern.⁴⁸

By the time of my 2018 seminar, several generations of students across multiple institutions had contributed, in various ways, to the database that would become *Runaway New England*. I knew that I did not want my students merely to reproduce the advertisements—I wanted them to think about the conditions of their reproduction. With this in mind, I constructed the entire seminar around the problem of runaways and digital archives. We started by reading classic meditations on archival loss and recovery by Saidiya Hartman, Stephanie Smallwood, and Marisa Fuentes.⁴⁹ Together, these amounted to a triple gut-punch to the basic rationale and

⁴⁵ Online Course Evaluations for COL370: Digital History, June 2014, copies in the author's possession.

⁴⁶ Block, *Colonial Complexions*, 197–98; Susan Campbell, *Frog Hollow: Stories from an American Neighborhood* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2019), 204; Hunt-Kennedy, *Between Fitness and Death*, 185.

⁴⁷ Daniel J. Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig, *Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 220–46; Nancy L. Maron and Sarah Pickle, “Sustaining the Digital Humanities: Host Institution Support beyond the Start-Up Phase,” *Ithaka S+R*, June 18, 2014, <https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/sustaining-the-digital-humanities/>.

⁴⁸ Kathi Inman Berens, “DH Adjuncts: Social Justice and Care,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2019*, ed. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 437–41.

⁴⁹ Hartman, “Venus,” 1–14; Stephanie E. Smallwood, “The Politics of the Archive and History's Accountability to the Enslaved,” *History of the Present* 6, no. 2 (2016): 117–132; Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 13–45.

epistemology of our project. What were the moral and ethical implications of collecting and displaying hundreds of oppressed and marginalized individuals online?

As Jessica Marie Johnson argues, “the legacy of commodifying black bodies and truncating black life infuses and informs digital design and execution.” Even well-intentioned databases “reinscribe enslaved Africans’ biometrics” in a way that replicates “the surveilling actions of slave owners and slave traders.”⁵⁰ The online buying and selling of Winthrop Sargent’s advertisement for Sancho is one disturbing example of this process, but it is only a superficial manifestation of a deeper problem. The underlying technologies that enable database development and publication are not neutral. As Safiya Umoja Noble points out, the entire digital infrastructure is predicated on systems of exploitation and exclusion. Analog legacies of racism, sexism, classism, colonialism, nationalism, ableism, and ecological devastation are replicated and amplified through digital platforms and require active and urgent resistance. To do otherwise is to remain complicit in sustaining the status quo.⁵¹

The students grasped this predicament clearly and we returned to it again and again during the term. Students were especially concerned that we were resurrecting discarded and vulnerable lives only to exploit them all over again for our own gain. In the never-ending crisis of the present, with a resurgent white nationalism and racist violence, widening economic disparities, and ecological collapse, what purpose does the database serve? How could we “dismantle the residue of commodification” of Black bodies and “counteract slavery’s dehumanizing impulses?”⁵² What would it mean to build a decolonized archive, a counter-archive, an insurgent archive, a socially conscious and politically aware mechanism that would somehow reverse or undo the archive of slavery? Although we did not come close to resolving this dilemma, the conversations that we shared and the ideas that we developed together were valuable and will shape future experiments and permutations of the project.

Some of our ideas were more successful than others. A well-meaning group of students wanted to assemble an advisory board of outside experts who could provide feedback on their work. Knowing that most academics are over-exploited, under-paid, and have enough problems dealing with their own students, I was skeptical and urged caution. Yet the students persisted. One respondent scolded the students for assuming that they were entitled to intellectual labor or advice without compensation, a feeling with which I sympathized, and which I thought made a good teachable moment. To my surprise, however, several experts indicated that they were willing to provide feedback on the students’ draft design. Another group explored geocaching and augmented reality features for mobile devices. Similar to the *Stolpersteine* that memorialize individual victims of the European Holocaust or the Witness Stones that mark the victims of slavery in southern Connecticut, an alert would pop-up on the phone of anyone in the vicinity of

⁵⁰ Jessica Marie Johnson, “Markup Bodies: Black [Life] Studies and Slavery [Death] Studies at the Digital Crossroads,” *Social Text* 36, no. 4 (2018): 59-60.

⁵¹ Safiya Umoja Noble, “Toward a Critical Black Digital Humanities,” in Gold and Klein, *Debates in the Digital Humanities* 2019, 27-35.

⁵² Johnson, “Markup Bodies,” 66.



Fig. 3. Visualizing the “residue of commodification.” A word cloud of runaway advertisements generated by the author using Voyant (voyant-tools.org).

a location mentioned in a runaway advertisement.⁵³ Limited time and resources prevented the implementation of this and other ambitious plans, including genealogical crowdsourcing, primary and secondary school outreach, art installations, and data-linking with other projects.

At every step of the collaborative process, we needed to remain vigilant against our own biases and assumptions, to resist reducing the advertisements to an exercise in empirical voyeurism. The language used in the source material was especially vexing. As Simon Newman observes, the term “runaway” itself carries a pejorative subtext of criminality, “emblematic of a discourse created largely by slave-owners.” Should we, instead, as others recommend, speak only of “self-emancipated” or “freedom-seeking” people?⁵⁴ These broad categories would include all those who fled as well as those who purchased, negotiated, or fought for their freedom. Does an emphasis on self-emancipation celebrate liberal individualism, producing an endless succession of Horatio Alger stories, and obscure the social support structures and underground networks that were crucial to escape attempts? If those who escaped enslavement were “freedom

⁵³ Gunter Demnig, *Stolpersteine*, accessed June 20, 2023, <https://www.stolpersteine.eu>; Dennis Culliton et al., *Witness Stones Project*, accessed June 20, 2023, <https://witnessstonesproject.org>.

⁵⁴ Simon P. Newman, “Rethinking Runaways in the British Atlantic World: Britain, the Caribbean, West Africa and North America,” *Slavery & Abolition* 38, no. 1 (2017): 68; P. Gabrielle Foreman et al., “Writing About Slavery/Teaching About Slavery: This Might Help,” community-sourced document, July 21, 2018, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1A4TEdDgYsIX-hlKezLodMIM71My3KTN0zxRv0iQTOOs>.

seekers," were those left behind uninterested in freedom? Would it be possible to reclaim certain terms as a positive political act of resistance? These discussions both reflected and anticipated the arguments over proper terminology that erupt periodically on Twitter and elsewhere.⁵⁵ I cautioned the students to take nothing for granted and that everything was up for debate. To respect the multivalent and elastic nature of the categories, names, and labels, we decided to minimize our interpretive apparatus and let the texts speak for themselves. And while I was not entirely satisfied with this decision, I respected the consensus of the class.

One result of our extended meditation on the problems of the digital archive was a shift in focus from big data to small data. Instead of aggregating statistical analyses of sex ratios, reward amounts, racial descriptors, and patterns of escape, we did deep dives into individual advertisements to tell a more personal and nuanced story. The goal, as one of my students put it, was to create "a respectful database of lost slave narratives."⁵⁶ In some ways, our journey harkened back to the cliometrics debates of the previous century and the visceral reaction to the enumerating impulses of the *SlaveVoyages* database in the present century.⁵⁷ An important lesson of the runaway class was that total coverage is a fantasy. Even if we managed to overcome the technical limitations of optical character recognition, damaged sources, and fragmentary collections, no matter how hard we tried, we would never find every runaway notice that had ever existed. And even if we did manage to find every document archived, microfilmed, or digitized, it would still not come close to a complete, scientific, or even representative picture of fugitivity.

There is a good argument to be made that new and emerging technologies enable us to practice history on an unprecedented scale, and some historians have presaged the return of "Big History" and the *longue durée*.⁵⁸ For all of their myriad flaws and occlusions, digital newspaper databases can reveal long-term patterns and epochal developments that would remain inscrutable to analog researchers.⁵⁹ Yet my experience with the runaway class suggests that the opposite is also true. The exponential, albeit lopsided and incomplete, growth in digitization over the past two decades has enabled researchers to build even richer and more meaningful local

⁵⁵ Vanessa M. Holden, "'I was born a slave': Language, Sources, and Considering Descendant Communities," *Journal of the Early Republic* 43, no. 1 (2023): 75-83.

⁵⁶ On runaway advertisements as slave narratives, see Antonio T. Bly, "'Indubitable Signs': Reading Silence as Text in New England Runaway Slave Advertisements," *Slavery and Abolition* 42, no. 2 (2021): 240-268.

⁵⁷ Robert William Fogel, *The Slavery Debates, 1952-1990: A Retrospective* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003); Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Viking, 2007); Johnson, "Markup Bodies," 57-79; David Eltis et al., *SlaveVoyages*, accessed June 20, 2023, <https://www.slavevoyages.org>.

⁵⁸ Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 88-116.

⁵⁹ Bob Nicholson, "The Digital Turn: Exploring the Methodological Possibilities of Digital Newspaper Archives," *Media History* 19, no. 1 (2013): 59-73; Cameron Blevins, "Space, Nation, and the Triumph of Region: A View of the World from Houston," *Journal of American History* 101, no. 1 (2014): 122-47.

and micro-histories.⁶⁰ These are not a mere supplement or replacement for grand narratives, of course, but a way to illuminate more expansive problems and questions.

In the brilliant opening chapter of *Dispossessed Lives*, Marisa Fuentes uses a printed notice for the enslaved runaway Jane to embark on a guided tour of the geographies of oppression and resistance in colonial Bridgetown, the impact of the urban environment on lived experiences of racism and sexism, and “the violent condition in which enslaved women appear in the archive disfigured and violated.”⁶¹ In what amounts to a master class in the methodology of archival subversion, Fuentes uses a close reading of this singular source to expose an entire world. The disfigured and fragmented lives of Sancho, Charles, Silva, and others unearthed by my students have a similar potential. Any one of them might form the basis of a game-changing lecture, essay, poem, film, book, or website. Indeed, one of the strengths of digital database projects is their ability to rapidly shift between different spatial registers, from the micro to the macro, and to empower new and better historical narratives.⁶²

Despite the dangerous chimera of complete coverage, the illusion of total knowledge, the database can still help us to uncover important stories. As with previous runaway classes, my students continued to unearth intriguing and provocative advertisements that pulled them in a variety of different directions. Sources with a strong local connection usually resonated the most. One of my students discovered a woman who escaped her captors and took refuge on our campus, not far from our classroom. This student used online databases and websites to piece together the outline of the puzzle, but we also secured funding for her to do traditional research in a physical archive. She unearthed previously untapped manuscript letters by and about her subject and discovered that her subject became a famous cook and restaurateur in New York. She also got in touch with a descendant of one of the enslavers mentioned in the original runaway notice, and he agreed to meet with her to discuss his family’s history. This pointed to an ongoing, unresolved tension within the database: it was usually far easier to locate information about the authors of the advertisements than their human prey. It also highlighted an important lesson about connecting digital and analog activity. As Laura Putnam argues in a prescient warning note to the historical profession, digital sophistication is no substitute for local knowledge or lived experience.⁶³

My earlier experience as lead developer for the *Princeton & Slavery* website and database taught me the power of working with non-academic partners and descendant communities. As our list of collaborators grew over time to encompass local historians, playwrights, filmmakers,

⁶⁰ On the perils and possibilities of newspaper digitization, see Amalia S. Levi and Tara A. Inniss, “Decolonizing the Archival Record about the Enslaved: Digitizing the *Barbados Mercury Gazette*,” *archipelagos* 4 (2020): <http://archipelagosjournal.org/issue04/levi-inniss-decolonizing.html>.

⁶¹ Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*, 16.

⁶² Edward L. Ayers and Scott Nesbit, “Seeing Emancipation: Scale and Freedom in the American South,” *The Journal of the Civil War Era* 1, no. 1 (2011): 3–24; Vincent Brown, “Narrative Interface for New Media History: *Slave Revolt in Jamaica, 1760–1761*,” *American Historical Review* 121, no. 1 (2016): 176–86.

⁶³ Lara Putnam, “The Transnational and the Text-Searchable: Digitized Sources and the Shadows They Cast,” *American Historical Review* 121, no. 2 (2016): 377–402.

librarians, museum curators, artists, and the modern descendants of both slaveholders and the enslaved, the project helped to bridge the gap between digital methodology and public engagement. My work on the website coincided with an international wave of student protests inspired and led by women of color. As I began designing the interface for the database, undergraduate members of the Black Justice League entered the office of the university president and peacefully occupied the building for two days.⁶⁴ My participation in these movements and dialogues with student protesters and other activists, both on and off campus, were essential to my digital practice and informed my work on what would eventually become the *Princeton & Slavery* website. Likewise, my classroom experiments helped me to conceptualize and contextualize Princeton's vibrant community of fugitive slaves.⁶⁵ All of this, in turn, influenced my approach to the runaway class.

In the most recent iteration of my seminar, I wanted my students to get out of the classroom and experience some of the physical spaces and material realities that we were reading about online. I also wanted them to use those experiences and connections to inform the construction of the database. Combining forces with fellow scholar-teachers Dixa Ramírez and Jeanette Zaragoza De León, I took my students on a tour of local archives and historical sites, culminating in a visit to the replica *Amistad* schooner.⁶⁶ I also required all thirty-three participants in the course to present the results of their research and design activities at a public symposium alongside representatives from leading digital history projects such as *Colored Conventions* and *Last Seen*.⁶⁷ Each working group spoke for about five minutes on their contribution to and vision for the database, while a few students who could not attend submitted written summaries of their involvement. More so than my previous experiments, this allowed the students to take full ownership of the project and gave them a personal stake in its success. At the symposium, they were no longer undergraduates under examination, but peers interacting with colleagues working on similar projects at different universities around the country.

Although our draft *Runaway New England* database remains a work in progress, these extracurricular and public activities provided a sense of purpose and direction for future work. In a sense, for the students at least, the learning process was more important than the finished product. The feedback I received at the end of the term was unanimously positive, studded with words like "cool," "amazing," "incredibly interesting and engaging," and "unique." The debates,

⁶⁴ Asanni York, "An Interview with Princeton's Black Justice League," in *Rhodes Must Fall: The Struggle to Decolonise the Racist Heart of Empire*, ed. Roseanne Chantiluke, Brian Kwoba, and Athinangamsi Nkopo (London: Zed Books, 2018), 212–26.

⁶⁵ Joseph Yannielli, "Princeton's Fugitive Slaves," *Princeton & Slavery Project*, accessed June 20, 2023, <https://slavery.princeton.edu/stories/runaways>.

⁶⁶ *Discovering Amistad*, accessed June 20, 2023, <https://www.discoveringamistad.org>.

⁶⁷ P. Gabrielle Foreman et al., *Colored Conventions Project*, accessed June 20, 2023, <https://coloredconventions.org>; Judith Giesberg et al., *Last Seen: Finding Family After Slavery*, accessed June 20, 2023, <https://www.informationwanted.org>; Ry Walker, "The Study of Slavery and Abolition in the Digital Age," *Yale Macmillan Center*, May 17, 2018, <https://macmillan.yale.edu/news/study-slavery-and-abolition-digital-age>.

excursions, and collective problem-solving were an indelible experience for all involved. Or as one student put it: "definitely one I will remember."⁶⁸ I will admit that, in my darker hours, I sometimes re-visit the evaluation forms to remind myself to persevere.

While I did not anticipate it at the beginning of my experiment with the runaway class, the need to bridge the analog-digital divide emerged as the most salient lesson of the project. This helped to inspire a new initiative, with colleagues on both sides of the Atlantic, on the problem of "Connecting Digital Histories of Fugitive Slaves." Sponsored by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK, the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC, and a select group of universities, research centers, and cultural institutions, the project brought together digital historians, educators, curators, and community activists to generate new connections and shared resources. This network, called *The Fugitive Digital*, is part of a broader movement to challenge archival erasures and to demonstrate that black lives matter in the fight for the past, present, and future.⁶⁹ This movement will succeed only to the extent that it can draw on traditions of protest for justice and equality and build insurgent archives that can transform scholarship as well as the world we share. As one of my Princeton colleagues put it: "The unbearable whiteness and patriarchy of traditional archives demand that new archives for black lives emerge and sustain themselves as spaces and sites for trauma, transcendence, and transformation."⁷⁰ At its best, that is what the runaway database can and should be.

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⁶⁸ Online Course Evaluations for HIST112J: Runaways, Rebels, Wenches, and Rogues, June 2018, copies in the author's possession.

⁶⁹ Christine Whyte et al., *The Fugitive Digital*, accessed June 20, 2023, <https://sites.google.com/view/thefugitivedigital>.

⁷⁰ Jarrett M. Drake, "#ArchivesForBlackLives: Building a Community Archives of Police Violence in Cleveland," *Medium*, April 22, 2016, <https://medium.com/on-archivy/archivesforblacklives-building-a-community-archives-of-police-violence-in-cleveland-93615d777289>.