

# The invisible history of the slave trade

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In our everyday lives, we invoke the metaphors of slavery. For example, if you feel you are being exploited you might say, "I am being treated like a slave." Yet few people actually know about the slavery that they constantly refer to – the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans.

Paradoxically, for all our invocation of slavery, there is still a real silence around the topic. For example, if one raises the issue of the slave trade, people suddenly become uncomfortable. One is asked to "forget the past" or "not to bring up that ancient history."

The slave trade and slavery in Western society, life, and culture is still by and large an invisible history.

This is the perfect time for all of us to learn more about this ignoble past. The United Nations has declared 2007 as the year to recognize and commemorate the slave trade and today we mark the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade throughout the British Empire.

Recognizing the marginality of the slave experience in Western historical discourses and consciousness, the UN has expressed concern that it has taken the international community 200 years to acknowledge slavery as a crime against humanity. The silence, I believe, is directly connected to the fact that during the period when these heinous activities took place, black people were turned into objects. Blacks were treated as chattel, items of commerce who were bought and sold by those in power.

As a result, Africans were cast out of humanity and "reduced to the category of animal or thing." Since the start of the slave trade, discourse, including so-called "enlightened" discourse, has centred on the sub-humanity of African peoples. "Educated" people like U.S. president and slaveholder Thomas Jefferson stated that Africans were only three-quarters human.

Because of slavery and the maltreatment of blacks, there was also the belief that Africans had a higher pain threshold than other races.

Little wonder the brutalization of the black body was a daily feature of slave life.

Thus, for the longest while, the idea that Africans were not fully human circulated in the Western psyche, mind, and culture; their pain, therefore, was not worthy of recognition and acknowledgment. Only this belief explains the long silence about slavery.

The silence is more than tragic and unforgivable given that, at the time, slavery underwrote the entire Western economic system.

Profits accrued from the slave trade and slavery led to rapid investments in various industries in Europe. The British (and American) industrial revolutions took place because of capital accumulation and investments from the slave trade and slavery.

The first financial institutions were founded as a result of the slave trade. Insurance companies, the most famous being Lloyd's of London, for example, sprang up in order to insure slave ships and their human cargo. Barclays Bank, the Bank of England, and the ill-fated Barings Bank were some of the major financial institutions established because of the wealth their founders gained from the slave and plantation trades.

British cities such as Liverpool, London, Glasgow, Bristol, and Plymouth grew rich from the gains of the trade in African human beings.

The cotton and iron industries were established on the backs of slaves.

Even cultural places, not usually associated with slavery, such as the British Museum and Art Gallery, must thank African slaves for their rise and glory.

Every important British European family, including the royal family, invested in and grew wealthy from the slave trade. In fact, the Royal African Company, an English slave-trading outfit, was founded by the Duke of York and his brother Charles II.

The 17th-, 18th-, and early 19th-century wars fought on the high seas between the nations of Western Europe were directly about the slave colonies.

Literally, the "building" of such countries like Britain was done on the backs of slaves. This was true not only for Britain but for all the other major western and northern European powers, and the United States. Europe's progress and modernity was predicated on Africa's misery.

Canada, itself, was part of the wider phenomenon of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery.

First, Canada was a colony of France and Britain, the two largest slave traffickers. Second, because the Atlantic slave-trading activities connected diverse economies, for much of the slavery period there was a brisk trade between the capitalists of eastern Canada and the slaveholders of the Caribbean.

Fish from Newfoundland and eastern Canada fed the enslaved people in the West Indies. The maritime products were then exchanged for slave-grown products: sugar, rum, molasses, tobacco, coffee, and the like. West Indian slaves were also bought by Canadian slaveholders and merchants.

Third, recent scholarship discovered that at least 60 of the slave ships used in the British slave trade were built in Canada.

Most important, enslavement of Africans itself was institutionalized in Canada. The enslavement of black people existed from at least 1628 to 1834 when it was abolished by imperial fiat.

Enslaved blacks like Marie-Joseph Angélique, who was executed in Montreal in 1734 for allegedly setting fire to that city, speak to the fact of slavery in Canada.

Likewise, the 47th article of capitulation at the time of the Conquest in 1760, in which the British recognized the French colonists' rights to keep in bondage their black and aboriginal slaves, underscores this fact of slavery in Canada.

Today, we still feel the effects of the slave trade and slavery.

Among other things, slavery was a racist system predicated upon an alleged black inferiority and white supremacy.

Those who profited from this system justified it by arguing that blacks deserved enslavement because they were inferior people.

Today we still feel the impact of this kind of thinking.

Institutionalized racist practices, anti-black racism, the colour line, colonialism, African underdevelopment and also that of former slave societies in the New World, duplicity of western governments, white supremacy, economic disadvantage, racialization of black peoples, and psychic distance between black and white have all been identified as legacies of the slave trade and slavery.

This is why it is important to disseminate knowledge about the trade and its legacies and to educate each new generation about these facts so that these horrors never occur again.

It is high time that this crime against people of African descent be acknowledged and steps taken to repair it. Yet, whenever blacks insist that Euro-dominated governments address this issue, they are often met with ridicule.

Recently British Prime Minister Tony Blair expressed "deep regret" over slavery but opposed reparations because he said slavery was perfectly legal at the time it was practised.

However, sociologist Patrick Wilmot notes that under Hitler the killing of Jews was legal – but this did not save the killers from hanging after the Nuremberg trials.

Wilmot further notes that as a lawyer Blair should have known that "Crimes against humanity are so heinous they transcend national boundaries." Further, Britain "recognized the need for reparations when it paid billions in today's money in 1833, not to the slaves but to British (slave) masters who 'lost' their property to the emancipation."

One thing is for sure: Before the damage can even be repaired, it has to be acknowledged.

Some UN member states, mainly Commonwealth countries, are going full steam ahead with bicentenary activities marking the 200th anniversary of abolition of the slave trade.

In Canada, the City of Toronto and the Province of Ontario have recognized the bicentenary and now involved in commemorative activities.

These Canadian jurisdictions must be applauded for their leadership. However, there is still no word from the federal government about official recognition.

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*Afua Cooper is an historian and author. Her book **The Hanging of Angelique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montréal** (HarperCollins 2006 and L'Editions De L'Homme 2007) is a national bestseller.*