"Too pure and air": challenging Canada's slavery narrative

Mike Perry¹

¹Canadian Studies, Trent University
1600 West Bank Drive, Peterborough, K9J 0G2, Ontario, Canada

Abstract

In Canada, “slavery has been erased from the collective consciousness… it is about an ignoble and unsavory past”. Slavery – known today as “human trafficking” – exists in Canada today. It always has. Yet most Canadians believe that slavery occurred exclusively in the plantations of the southern United States and would be shocked to learn that there was slavery in Canada. This paper will challenge the public history narrative of Canada as the peaceable kingdom, which pervades despite Canada’s slavery past. Canada’s experience with slavery is erroneously identified almost exclusively with freedom (e.g. the Underground Railroad). Briefly presenting a factual account of the nature and extent of slavery in historically – with reference to indigenous peoples, New France, Upper Canada, the Maritimes, Chinese immigrants and “white slavery” – the mythologies, hegemonies, and systemic influences that create and reproduce Canada’s positive national narrative of – and despite – its experiences with slavery will also be examined. The paper concludes by offering concrete ways in which acknowledging and addressing Canada’s slave history may help solve complex contemporary social problems, including indigenous-settler relations, racial inequality, and human trafficking. Historian Afua Cooper has declared that so far removed is Canada’s slave past from the Canadian consciousness, and the study of its history, that students could complete a graduate degree in Canadian studies without knowing that slavery ever existed in Canada. This paper is a modest contribution to helping ensure this does not continue to happen.

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