



# RUNAWAYS LONDON

**TEACHING RESOURCE KS3/4**  
**ABENA ESSAH**



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Professor Simon P. Newman

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## THANKS

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## INTRODUCTION

Between the 1650s and 1780s many hundreds of enslaved people were brought to London. Most were African although a significant minority were South Asian and a smaller number were indigenous American.

While enslaved in the capital some attempted to escape and, on occasions, those who pursued them placed advertisements in London newspapers seeking the capture and return of these freedom-seekers.

The Runaways London project has commissioned five poets and two artists to respond to these historical advertisements and create new poems and artworks which investigate the lives, stories and histories excluded from the advertisements.

This resource by poet Abena Essah takes your class through their creative process to produce their own poems responding to this theme.

The Runaways London anthology containing all commissioned poems and artworks, further teaching resources and a short film about the project can be found at: [spreadtheword.org.uk/runaways](http://spreadtheword.org.uk/runaways)

## ABOUT RUNAWAYS LONDON

Runaways London is an arts heritage programme which engages with archival evidence of enslaved Londoners of the 17th and 18th Century, who escaped their enslavement to find new lives in the City.

Working with research by University of Glasgow's Runaway Slaves in Britain project ([runaways.glasgow.ac.uk](http://runaways.glasgow.ac.uk)), a team of young poets and artists of African and South Asian heritage developed a series of poems and artworks responding to so called 'runaway slave' advertisements published in London newspapers between the 1650s and 1780s.

Working on the project are poets: Momtaza Mehri, Gboyega Odubanjo, Abena Essah, Memoona Zahid and Oluwaseun Olayiwola and artists: Olivia Twist and Tasia Graham. Runaways London is managed by Spread the Word and the project publisher is Ink Sweat & Tears Press.

# RESEARCHING THE LIVES OF ENSLAVED LONDONERS

Who inhabited 17th and 18th century London? Kings, courtiers and a few of the city's more affluent citizens have left us portraits of themselves and their families, and some of the buildings they constructed and the things that they owned survive, allowing us to feel the tenor of their lives. A few people like Samuel Pepys have left diaries and documentary records, while still more can be traced in court or church records. But although a few seventeenth-century Londoners speak to us through the archives most have left little or even no trace and we can imagine their lives in only the broadest and vaguest terms.

Londoners of African and South Asian origin are amongst the most invisible and silent of these historical figures, although there were a significant number in the capital. A number of them were sailors and dock workers, while a few were craftsmen, labourers and washerwomen. Most, however, were domestic servants in the households of elite and mercantile families who had spent time in or had connections with the British Empire's colonies. Some were free, a few were bound and indentured servants, but others were enslaved.

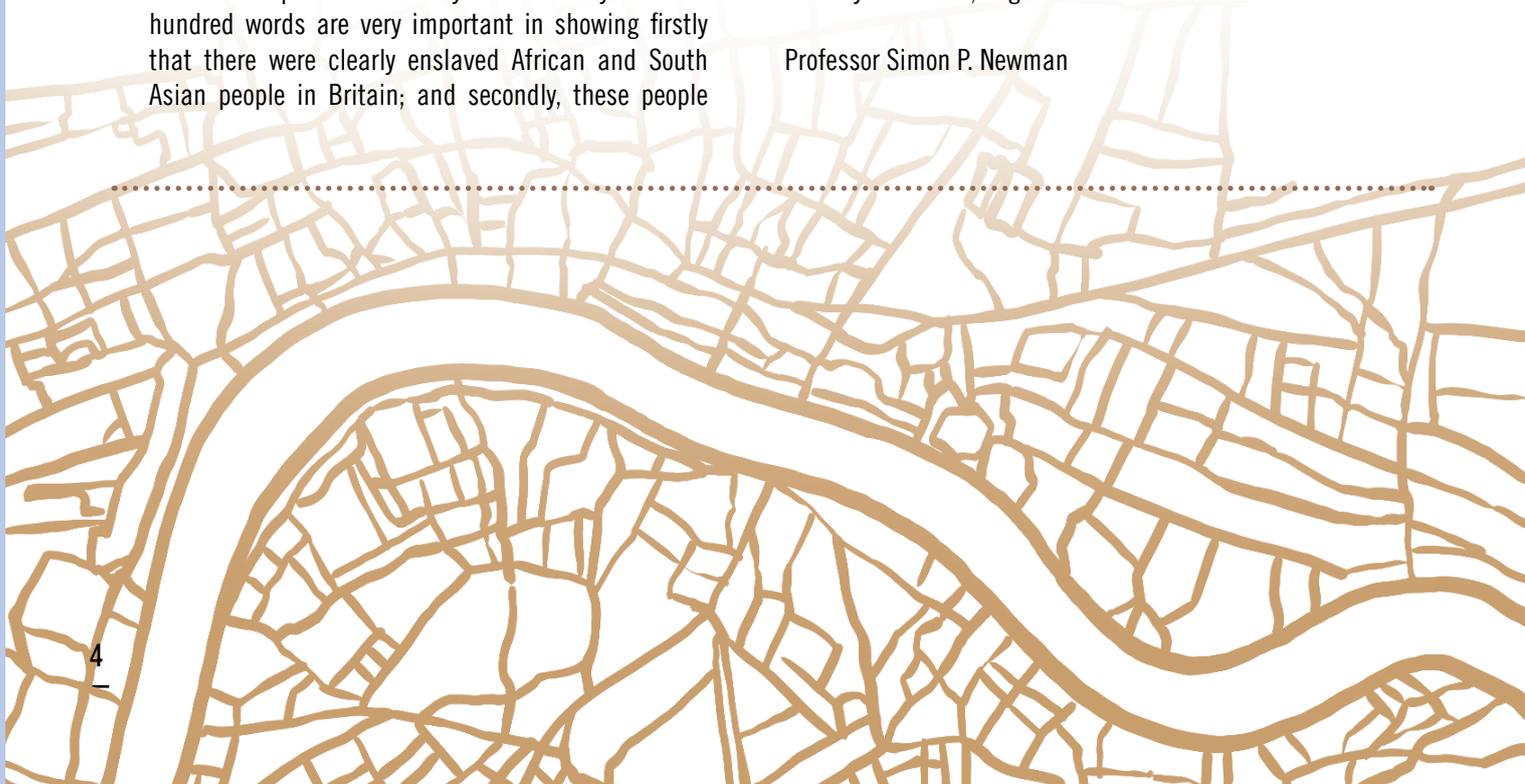
Without portraits or diaries, one of the ways we know about the existence of these enslaved Londoners is through many hundreds of short newspaper advertisements placed in newspapers by masters and enslavers who described and offered rewards for the capture and return of enslaved people who had escaped. Often called 'runaway slave' advertisements, these short pieces of usually between fifty and one hundred words are very important in showing firstly that there were clearly enslaved African and South Asian people in Britain; and secondly, these people

resisted by attempting to escape. The records also reveal that more of these advertisements appeared in London's newspapers than in those of any other city; and that the average age of these freedom-seekers was just 16 years old.

The Runaway Slaves in Britain project has located many hundreds of newspaper advertisements about enslaved escapees in the British Isles and made them accessible in an easily searchable database. In many cases these short advertisements are the only surviving record we have of a particular enslaved person, but even then they may tell us very little. Sometimes we don't even know the name of the freedom-seeker. We might learn whether they were of African or South Asian descent, how well they spoke English, the clothes they had been wearing when they escaped, and in some cases whether they were scarred by slave brands or had been forced to wear metal slave collars around their necks.

It is all that we don't know about London's freedom-seekers that encouraged us to develop this project, Runaways London. Compiling as much historical data as possible about enslaved people in London we gave this information to young poets and artists based in London and of African and South Asian heritage. We asked them to create works speaking to these archival silences; building from short runaway advertisements and developing ideas, impressions and stories about the brave Londoners, some of them little more than children, who dared to challenge their enslavers and run away into the City of London, eager to find better and freer lives.

Professor Simon P. Newman



# ACTIVITIES

*WHEREAS a black Negro Woman, about nineteen Years old, with two Letters on her Breast and Shoulder, made her Escape out of the Ship Hannah, Capt. Fowler, for Jamaica, the 6th of June last, goes by the Name of Sabinah, is supposed to be deluded away by some other Blacks about Whitechapel, Rag-Fair, or Rotherhith: Whoever brings her to the late Mr. Neate's, on Lawrence-Pountney-Hill, shall have Three Guineas Reward.*

— The Daily Advertiser, 14th September 1743



# BLACK BALLS AND SHAPED POEMS

## BY ABENA ESSAH

*Exploring the history of Black balls using free writes to create visual or shaped poems*



- Explore the history of Black balls and how freedom-seekers thrived and built communities
- Discuss and write about themes of Black balls, escape routes, heritage, music, community
- Use free writes to generate creative material
- Think about the shape of a poem and what that shape communicates
- Draft and write a new poem

## 'BRA FIE' AND BLACK BALLS

Begin by reading the poem 'Bra Fie' below. Ask the class: how did you feel about the poem? What did you think the poem was about? Who, where and what did you notice in the poem?

Then read the newspaper excerpt about Black balls below. Although not particularly well known about today, Black-owned taverns operated at the time and Black-only social events like the one described were held by and for the Black community. As well as the event described here, another is recorded as being a ball for nearly 200 people which took place in a pub in Westminster.

Ask the class to think about how these black balls might function as spaces for the Black population to find community and joy. Discuss why this might have been important for enslaved Londoners.

## FREE WRITES

A free write is an activity where you write continuously for a set period of time to release a stream of ideas. Free writing is done off the top of your head in response to a writing prompt, without thinking too much about technique or form. It can be a useful technique for preventing your inner critic from stopping you putting pen to paper. The only aim is to keep writing continuously.

When facilitating a free write, you can give students a starter sentence for them to complete. This can help them begin writing.

As they are writing you can also gradually deliver prompts to aid students with fresh ideas or things to explore. Sentence starters and writing prompt examples can be found in the activity descriptions for each free write. If students are stuck at any point, they can simply repeat their previous word or sentence until fresh inspiration hits; but they mustn't stop writing.

## FREE WRITE 1

Ask the class to imagine they are someone attending one of the Black balls and to write from their perspective. Set them writing for about 4–5 minutes. Remind them this is not about producing perfect writing, but about generating lots of ideas.

Sentence starters:

*I can hear the sound of...*  
*The sound of... is floating through the air...*  
*In the middle of the room there is...*  
*My body can feel...*  
*People are...*  
*The smell of...*



Writing prompts:

*What can you hear, see, taste and smell?*  
*Is there food there?*  
*Is there a band, if so, what does the band look like?*  
*What instruments are they playing?*

Once you have brought the free write to a close, remind them that this writing is to generate their own ideas, and they don't need to share anything if they don't want to. However, if anyone is willing, invite them to share any of their ideas or sentences they particularly like with the class.

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## FREE WRITE 2

In every story or poem there is a turning point. Either something exciting that happens or a conflict that needs resolving; something that changes the narrative arc of a poem or story.

In 'Bra Fie' the turning point that interrupts the description of a Black ball is Sabinah remembering how she was captured on the Slave Ship and escaped. Sabinah is based on a real enslaved Londoner who escaped.

Read the newspaper advertisements seeking Sabinah's recapture. They describe how Sabinah is 'deluded away by some blacks' — in other words helped by her community to escape.

Use another 5-minute free write to help develop more ideas.

This time ask the class to imagine that their character attending the Black ball is an enslaved person who has escaped.

Ask them to think about how they escaped? If so, where were they in London when they escaped? On a ship, in a Slave Owner's House? Who came to get them, was it their friends, or perhaps someone the person in your poem had fallen in love with? And where did these people help them to run to?

Sentence starters:

*I climb out of the window of master's house...*  
*I am standing on the piers about to board...*  
*I remember the warmth of...*  
*My body is shuddering with...*  
*They came to get me...*



## FREE WRITE 3

'Bra Fie' tells the story of Sabinah who has Ghanaian heritage (a detail I invented based on my own background) and how her community at the ball supports her through a homecoming ceremony where she is reconnected with other women and people of Ghanaian heritage. They welcome her and name her/give her back her indigenous Ghanaian name through song.

Ask the class to think about the importance of heritage/culture, family and community. What celebrations within their heritage remind them of the homecoming ceremony? It could be a church hall party, a family gathering at a religious celebration, or a barbeque with extended family with music.

Use these experiences for another 5-minute free write. Ask students to envision and describe a scene that demonstrates celebration of community and to tell the story of the freedom-seeker they are writing about.



Sentence starters:

*Four women beckon me forward to dance...*

*We sit in a circle and sing...*

*Everyone closes their eyes...*

*An elder at the front of the hall calls my name and I...*

*They serve us all plates of...*

*They welcome me home by...*

Writing prompts:

*Does the freedom-seeker have an indigenous name might they reclaim at the naming and homecoming ceremony?*

*Is there singing, if so, what are people singing?*

*Is there another language your character or anyone else might be speaking or singing?*

## BONUS TASK

Rather than using their own culture, the class could think about and research a particular country in Africa and their culture. They could use their research to guide their free write above.

## CREATE YOUR POEM

'Bra Fie' is written in a circle to represent the people sitting around the whole room, a sense of community and the shape of the dancefloor.

In pairs ask the class to discuss the ideas they've produced in their free writes and think about what shape their finished poem could be.



Could the poem sway, the way people would when dancing, with the verse gradually travelling to one side of the page and travelling back to the other side of the page and so forth? What other shapes could represent movement, music, family or community? A (family) tree? A drum? A horn? Or perhaps a circle similar to 'Bra Fie'.

Ask the class to read over all three of their free writes and select their favourite lines and ideas to use to create their final poem.

They can arrange and rearrange these lines on the page, and then use them as a starting point to create a shaped poem in the style of 'Bra Fie'. It should use material from all three free writes covering the Black ball, some information about the freedom-seeker, and a celebration of their culture. The free write sentences are just a starting point and the class should feel free to add to them, or to edit and adapt what they've already written.

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## SHARING AND DEBRIEF

Once students have finished, ask those who would like to, to share their final poems, showing how it's presented on the page as well as reading the text. The rest of the class can pick out the elements that they find most effective.

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# RESOURCES

*RUN away, a NEGRO BOY, about 13 years old, tall of his age, answers to the name of TOM, and speaks good English; had on when he went away, an old fustian frock, brown cloth waistcoat, dirty leather breeches, and an old flapped hat. Whoever will bring him to the Union Coffee-house, in Cornhill, shall be well rewarded for their trouble; and whoever harbours him after the publication of this advertisement, will be prosecuted as the law directs.*

— Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser, 19 August 1771

# BRA FIE

## BY ABENA ESSAH

*for Sabinah*

### Homecoming Ball, Rotherhithe, 18 June 1743

Song of brass horns  
is rich dancing through my scalp;  
he shaved my coils but they are growing. Black  
hands, black hands grasping music; black eyes are  
wide eyed, I rest my eyelids. Listen to the swell of thudding  
drum beating, beating. We are so many, grinning teeth, tightly packed  
but upright; yellow glow kissing the cheeks of everything. A man gets up to  
swirl, shoulder blades bending, hands lifted - ghost of orange soil flicking at his feet.  
Blood  
congeals on his back, raw wounds from whipping. He keeps swirling. Red still dripping

red in my mouth.  
Back cold on ship Hannah's floor  
metal heaving my windpipe  
brothers' limbs on top of me  
feet in my mouth.

They came to get me: Shaquan, Oluwafemi, Afia. He tried to pack me away, chains again but  
they gripped me with hands so warm, in cunning Navy sailor suits, telling white men on deck  
'Mr Neate's request: Sabinah is needed up stream'

Goodbye death in Jamaica.

In this room we are the sun's offspring. Elder Oppong glides to the centre, dancing  
scatters; he calls the names of us, fresh arrivals: 'James Asante, Anike Yahaya  
Akosua Darkwah'

Akosua, the name Sunday sung for me  
out the womb, I arise. Women who know the weight of me approach  
speaking the language my spine was bent to forget,  
resting wise palms upon my shoulders;  
diaphragms swelling

*Nyamæy da woase*  
*Me Nyankopɔn yeyi woayɛ*  
*Sɛ wode Akosua abeduru asumdwiem*  
*Yɛnnsu bio*  
*Emom yɛbɛ sa na yɛagye yen ani*  
*Odomankoma yɛda woase*

Densu river is streaming down my cheeks

peel in the warmth of it all

the letters on my shoulder

## BLACK BALLS

‘Among the sundry fashionable routs or clubs, that are held in town, that of the Blacks or Negro servants is not the least. On Wednesday night last, no less than fifty-seven of them, men and women, supped, drank, and entertained themselves with dancing and music, consisting of violins, French horns, and other instruments, at a public-house in Fleet-street, till four in the morning. No Whites were allowed to be present, for all the performers were Blacks.’

*London Chronicle*, 16-18 February 1764

‘Although the white community expressed some amusement at the idea of a black social life, such a life was vibrant. If servants...were accustomed to making such arrangements for their masters, they were surely capable of making them for themselves.’

Gretchen Gerzina, *Black London: Life Before Emancipation*  
(Rutgers University Press, 1995)

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## ADVERTS ABOUT SABINAH

‘A Black Negro Woman, about nineteen Years old, with two Letters on her Breast and Shoulder, made her Escape out of the Ship Hannah, Capt. Fowler, for Jamaica, the 6th inst. goes by the Name of Sabinah, is suppos’d to be deluded away by some other Black about Whitechapel, Rag-Fair, or Rotherhith. Whoever brings her to the late Mr. Neale’s, on Lawrence-Pountney-Hill, shall have three Guineas Reward; or if put on board the Ship again any time between this and next Tuesday, Ten Shillings more.’

*Daily Advertiser* (London), 17 June 1743

‘WHEREAS a black Negro Woman, about nineteen Years old, with two Letters on her Breast and Shoulder, made her Escape out of the Ship Hannah, Capt. Fowler, for Jamaica, the 6th of June last, goes by the Name of Sabinah, is supposed to be deluded away by some other Blacks about Whitechapel, Rag-Fair, or Rotherhith: Whoever brings her to the late Mr. Neate’s, on Lawrence-Pountney-Hill, shall have three Guineas Reward.’

*Daily Advertiser* (London), 14 September 1743



The poem uses some sentences in the Twi language:

***Bra Fie:*** Come home

***Nyame yɛda woase:*** God we thank you

***Me Nyankopɔn yeyi woaye:*** My God we praise you

***Sɛ wode Akosua abeduru asumdwiem:*** For safely and peacefully bringing Akosua back

***Yɛnsu bio:*** We won't cry anymore

***Emom yɛbɛ sa na yɛagyɛ yen ani:*** Instead, we will dance and celebrate

***Odomankoma yɛda woase:*** God almighty we thank you

## ABOUT THE ARTIST: ABENA ESSAH

Abena Essah is a multidisciplinary artist based in London. Their work intertwines queer identity, Blackness, music and Ghanaian heritage. More recently, their practice has focused on excavating untold stories of Queer African ancestry and Black history. They are a BBC Words First finalist 2020, a Some-Antics Slam Champion and Roundhouse Poetry Slam finalist.

Abena Essah is also an alumnus of Obsidian and The Writing Room and has been published in the *Roundhouse Poetry Collective Alumnus Anthology*.





Runaways London is an arts heritage programme which engages with archival evidence of enslaved Londoners of the 17th and 18th Century, who escaped their enslavement to find new lives in the City.

A team of young poets and artists of African and South Asian heritage developed a series of poems and artworks responding to so called 'runaway slave' advertisements published in London newspapers between the 1650s and 1780s.

These resources, created by the participating artists, lead your class through their creative processes to produce poems and artworks responding to the project.

Resources in this series are:

***Black Balls and Shaped Poems*** by Abena Essah

***Collage Illustrations*** by Tasia Graham

***Reimagining 17th and 18th Century Runaways*** by Momtaza Mehri

***Found Poems*** by Gboyega Odubanjo

***Ekphrastic Poems*** by Oluwaseun Olayiwola

***Black-Owned Tavern Portraits*** by Olivia Twist

***Fragmentary Narratives*** by Memoona Zahid

The Runaways London anthology containing all commissioned poems and artworks, further teaching resources, and a short film about the project can be found at: [spreadtheword.org.uk/runaways](https://spreadtheword.org.uk/runaways)

