BEYOND DIGITIZATION:
ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY TO DECOLONIZE THE ARCHIVAL RECORD

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During 2018 and 2019, two historic newspapers, The Barbados Mercury Gazette (1783-1848) and The Barbadian (1822-1861), housed in the Barbados Department of Archives, were digitized through Endangered Archives Programme grants. As primary sources, they offer a detailed view of every aspect of the dystopian life in a British colony in the Caribbean during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Digitization offers unparalleled access to these colonial newspapers that were previously largely inaccessible due to their fragility.

The presentation goes beyond digitization to discuss what happens after digitization is completed. Considering that the newspapers were part of the colonial information apparatus, how do we read against the grain to locate and reveal marginalized voices hidden in the digitized pages?

If our aim is to “lift” the voices of the enslaved from the pages, and retrospectively create a body of archival records, we need to provide access to the digitized pages as data. Such information however exists “locked” in digitized images that due to the deterioration of the paper and the discoloration of the pages are impossible to OCR. Finding and transcribing these ads is necessarily a manual process, at present.

Among the wealth of information appearing regularly in the newspapers, of particular importance are the “runaway slaves” ads. Archives usually preserve very little descriptive information about the enslaved, because their lived experiences were rarely recorded. When they appear in the archival record, they are enumerated or appraised as commodities. Thus these ads offer a rich trove of information about individual people, including name, age, physical appearance, skin color, clothing, accent, distinguishing features (such as body modifications from their country of origin or bodily harm, the result of violence), friends, relatives, and skills.

Digitization does not solve the gaps, silences, and omissions inherent in the archival record and the colonial epistemologies they contain. Colonial newspapers reflect the voices of the white class of planters, merchants, and colonial authorities. Simply digitizing and putting online risks elevating and amplifying the very colonial worldviews we mean to avoid.

To decolonize the record about the enslaved, digitization is only the starting point for further projects and initiatives to engage the community with its own history. Recent scholarship and public humanities efforts have shown that it is possible to challenge the erasure of colonial archival sources and read between the lines to tease out information that is not readily visible.

Our aim is to create a collection of material by clipping “runaway slaves” ads from the digitized newspapers, transcribing the text, and enriching the human stories in each ad with additional contextual
information. More specifically, the first part of the presentation will focus on work to develop the “Barbados Runaway Slaves Digital Collection,” a partnership between the Barbados Archives, the local non-profit HeritEdge Connection, and the Early Caribbean Digital Archive (ECDA) at Northeastern University (Boston).

This digital collection aims to foreground the centrality of enslaved voices by ‘lifting’ ads of individuals who chose to escape slavery from the pages of the newspapers, and turning them into individual, standalone archival records previously unrecorded in the archives. When completed, the “Runaway Slaves Digital Collection” will provide a central location for collecting and presenting these ads, and other opportunities for the public, especially students, both in Barbados, as well as abroad, to interact with the material in creative ways.

By ‘reading’ these ads in various ways and being able to ‘see’ them collectively, we can start seeing patterns and coping mechanisms. At the same time, the availability of this information points to what is not there, and invites us to be sensitive to gaps and silences.

The second part of the presentation will discuss public outreach initiatives. Material digitized through generous grants by institutions in the Global North are eventually hosted in digital platforms in those institutions. While praiseworthy, digitization through such grants ends up benefitting scholars in the Global North. Usually local people are unaware of these platforms, and often unable to access them, either due to bandwidth issues or simply to interfaces that might not be intuitive to use. We have tried to remedy this by focusing on public history work we are doing to increase awareness of and engagement with these digitized colonial records.

During the fall of 2019, we conducted a series of workshops aimed to familiarize the public with accessing the newspapers online and to transcribe ads. The workshops also provided a platform for the public to discuss the ads, and the many facets of slavery. People were able to see ancestors who chose to resist and escape bondage in adverse, inhumane conditions. Due to COVID-19, workshops planned for 2020 are being held online. The aim of these workshops is to engage people with the ads in creative ways, through genealogical research, speculative writing, or digital methods. In this way, we invite the public to contextualize the ads through their local knowledge of places mentioned in the ads, or intimate information about lived experiences. Beyond information that is there, we also hope that workshop participants can imagine what is not there, complete the stories, and give enslaved individuals their place in the archival record.

Additionally, the digitization of these primary sources has great potential for digital projects by students and other researchers that can highlight various aspects of the island’s history. The “runaway slaves” ads help people challenge the customary narrative of Barbadian passivity and submissiveness to slavery; reconstruct family and community networks that supported enslaved Barbadians; and they help give voice to ancestors, whom colonial records intentionally left voiceless.