"Deluded and Ruined": Diana Bastian—Enslaved African Canadian Teenager and White Male Privilege

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Abstract

This essay explores the vulnerability of enslaved African Canadian Black women by examining the death of Diana Bastian, an enslaved Black teenager who in 1792 was raped by George More, a member of the Governing Council of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Though Bastian begged for assistance during the resultant pregnancy, More denied her such aid and cast her aside. Bastian further appealed to More's brother, a local magistrate, who also denied Bastian any help, and Bastian died giving birth to the twins More sired. Bastian's owner, Abraham Cuyler, appeared to have been absent from the province at the time of Bastian's rape, pregnancy, and labour. Bastian's brief and tragic history is told in her death certificate recorded at the St. George's Anglican Church, Sydney. This very succinct document brings to light the story of racial and sexual abuse on the Canadian frontier, and helps us to understand the marginal status of Black women's lives in colonial Canada. I suggest in this essay that when we place enslaved Black women at the centre of Canada's historical and colonial past, we come to a new understanding of the power and privilege White men possessed, and the catastrophic impact it had on Black women's bodies.

Keywords: Slavery, rape, Black women, Loyalist migrations, Canadian colonialism, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia

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This short essay is a homage to Diana Bastian (or Bustian), an enslaved Black teenager of Sydney, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Bastian lived most of her life as a slave in obscurity, but entered historical consciousness as a result of her rape, pregnancy, and subsequent death. We are able to learn of Bastian's tragic story because of a brief burial-record document inserted in the St. George's Anglican Church's burial registry in Sydney.

Canada is not often acknowledged as a site of slavery even though in this country the enslavement of Black people had been institutionalized from the early decades of the European colonial project in the 17th century to 1833, when the British government abolished slavery in its colonies, Canada included (Cooper, 2006). Canada has created an image of itself as a "haven" for fleeing American Underground Railroad freedom seekers due to the fact that slavery was abolished there at least 30 years before abolition occurred in the United States in 1865 (Berlin, 2015). In creating and maintaining this image as a haven or "freedom's land," Canadians have banished from their collective memory their own history of enslaving. Thus, the enslavement of Blacks in Canada, as a historical process, is still largely unknown within Canadian historical studies as a whole (Cahill, 1995; Cooper, 2006; Elgersman, 1999; Whitfield, 2016).

This essay then acts as a corrective to the marginalization of the story of slavery in Canada. In 1792, Diana Bastian, a 15-year-old enslaved Nova Scotian girl, died giving birth to twins. Her body was wantonly used and her life stolen and broken by White men, and the system of slavery itself. Bastian was owned by Loyalist Abraham Cuyler and taken advantage of by George More, one of Cuyler's friends and colleagues. These men were part of the colonial elite, and therefore in many respects can be described as founding fathers of an emerging Canadian nation.

A dominant Canadian foundational chronicle is that of Canada as a site of goodness and mercy. Yet this myth would be punctured were we to place the bodies of brutalized enslaved Black women at the centre of this telling. Placing enslaved Black women at the centre allows us to see how their bodies are critical to an understanding of constructed colonial narratives. Slavery, violence, brutality, and the attendant White male privilege are some of the suppressed stories of our past.

Abraham Cuyler, a displaced Loyalist from Albany, New York, owned Bastian. As his property, Cuyler had full dominion over the life and body of his slave woman. White-authored slave laws and the practice of enslavement made it so. Black enslavement and inferiority was codified in law, as was White freedom, privilege, and superiority. In the English slave codes of the Americas (beginning in Barbados in 1661; Jamaica, South Carolina, Virginia, and Maryland would later follow suit), enslaved people were codified as property or chattel. The French imperial Code Noir of 1685 also re-affirmed the chattel status of enslaved people. By 1700, in the Americas, to be Black was to be a slave until proven otherwise. These laws also made Blackness a mark of servility (J. L. Morgan, 2004; Obregón, 2005; Riddell, 1925; Rugemer, 2013).
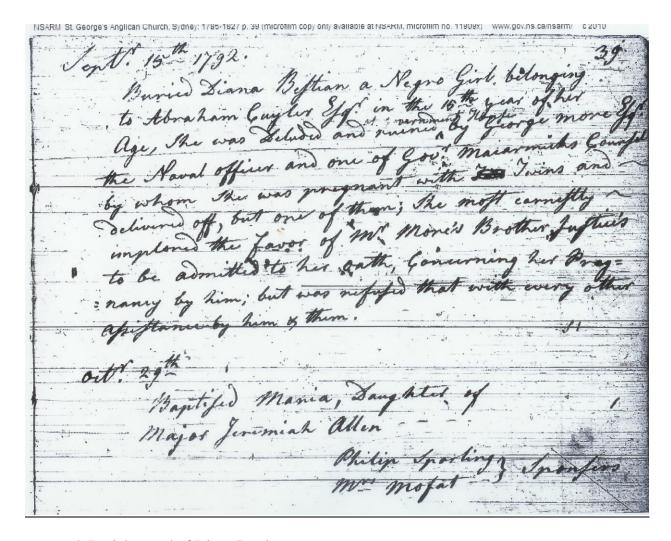
Figure 1. Burial record of Diana Bastian.

The story begins with a rape, that of Diana Bastian. It ends with her death giving birth to twins. George More, a White naval officer and member of the government's Executive Council, was the rapist. The record states that Bastian "was deluded and ruined at Government House by George More, Esq. the naval officer and one of Gov. Macarmick's Council" (see Figure 1). Using 18th century euphemistic language—deluded and ruined were code words for rape or sexual violation—the writer of the document tells us that George More raped Bastian and thus "ruined" her. More committed the heinous act at the Cape Breton government chambers, the very place from which the colony was administered, and where he worked and carried out his duties as a member of the Executive Council. The insert for the September 15, 1792 St. George's church burial records reveals that sad and tragic fact of Bastian's abuse and demise (Nova Scotia Archives, 2017).

This is the only written document we have about the life of Bastian, and it is an important document. Someone took time to record these incidents—of her "ruin," her traumatic labour, her death, and her burial. Bastian, unlike most enslaved African Canadians, did not pass into obscurity and anonymity. This record of her burial ensures that for two and a half centuries later, we would know of the violence and atrocity that was committed on her body. We do not know what Bastian looked like. We do not know if she had parents or siblings, or if she was part of a

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Black community. It could be that she left blood relatives behind in Albany, or other parts on the North and Northeast, as the American Revolution had convulsed the 13 colonies and divided families, slave and free, Black and White, and sent thousands of Loyalists as refugees to the four corners of the earth. Rebels (or patriots) seized slaves and other property belonging to Loyalists, and thousands of Blacks who were owned by rebels fled to British lines. Additionally, White loyalists reading the writing on the wall fled as fast as they could with as many enslaved Blacks they could feasibly take with them. For sure, Bastian's Black community (slave or free) was divided by the Revolution as did the community from which her owner came (Gilbert, 2012; Pulis, 1999).

Abraham Cuyler

Bastian's owner, Abraham Cuyler, was a prominent Loyalist born in a Dutch New York family. He was the last mayor of Albany under British colonial rule. Cuyler had the distinction of being the third member of his family to become Mayor of Albany, and he held this position until 1776, when the 13 colonies revolted against Britain. Cuyler sided with the Crown, which lost the war. As a result of his allegiance to Britain, the former mayor lost a lot. As a Loyalist he was beaten and jailed by the victorious Americans, and they seized his lands and home (Flick, 1901). Finally, in 1784 (a year after the peace was signed) he fled to Canada, first to Montreal where military governor Frederick Haldimand made him "inspector of refugees." In Quebec, Cuyler was part of a community of thousands of Loyalist refugees who had fled the new United States. In Canada, this dispossessed group called on the British government to support them by compensating them for their loss. For many Loyalists this meant finding them new homes in friendly colonies, with gifts of land grants, tools, seeds, farming implements, and money, and for some, positions in the colonial service.

Haldimand realized that there was not enough land in Quebec to parcel out to the exiled, destitute, and disgruntled Loyalists, so he looked to the newly ceded colony of Cape Breton as a possible destination for loyalist immigrants (Sutherland, Tousignant, & Dionne-Tousignant, 1983). Cuyler himself also eyed Cape Breton, and convinced Haldimand that he could successfully settle thousands of the Quebec Loyalists in Cape Breton (Cuyler, 1784; Sutherland et al., 1983).

Cape Breton, which had been seized from France during the Seven Years' War, was left underdeveloped, but now because of the Loyalist emergency it became open for British settlement. Cuyler received permission to migrate with a group of Loyalists domiciled at Quebec, and in the fall of 1784 eventually took 140 of such settlers with him to Cape Breton. The Loyalists first arrived in Louisburg, the old French capital, but eventually Cuyler himself acquired property and settled in Sydney, a new town founded largely by Loyalists and newly arrived settlers from England. As settlers—Loyalists and English—arrived in Cape Breton, a government was organized. It was not large enough to have a legislature, and so an Executive Council was established. Though it was its own colony, it was subservient to Nova Scotia. Joseph Frederick Wallet DesBarres, a Swiss military official working in the employ of the British Crown, was sent from England as Lieutenant Governor. The Executive Council would help DesBarres govern the colony (R. J. Morgan, 1987).

Cuyler was appointed member of the Executive Council, and was also made secretary and registrar of the colony. Next to the governor, and the attorney general, Cuyler was the most important official in Cape Breton. Reading through Cuyler's biographies, one is struck by how

adamant he and other high-ranking Loyalists were in thinking that the Crown owed them, and thus sought relentlessly to recover as much as possible through appointments and largesse what they lost in the Revolution. It is likely that Abraham Cuyler felt that going from being the mayor of a bustling and thriving city (Albany) to a backwater settlement was a step down. He probably also questioned his decision to side with the Crown during the war (Flick, 1901; R. J. Morgan, 1975, 1983).

Cuyler's time on Council was fraught with conflict; he fought incessantly with the governor and led a faction that thwarted a lot of the latter's initiatives for the new colony. When DesBarres was recalled and William Macarmick installed as the new governor, Cuyler and his party continued to be a fractious presence on Council. Cuyler felt that he should be given a higher position, and also that he should have more say in the running of the colony (R. J. Morgan, 1983).

Many loyalists felt that having lost the war, they could no longer live in the newly formed United States, and therefore sought to relocate to Canada or other British possessions. But many like Cuyler, especially if they were White and male like he was, stood to gain in the British territories to which they fled. In their new homes, most were compensated with money, lands, and other kinds of largesse. If their enslaved property was not seized by the rebels, Loyalists were allowed to bring these slaves with them to their new homes (Jasanoff, 2011). White Loyalists brought upward of 1,400 enslaved Africans with them to Maritime Canada (i.e., New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island). Diana Bastian was one of these slaves (Whitfield, 2016), but was she the only slave whom Cuyler brought? Given his position and status, I suggest he had the ability to bring more than one slave with him to Canada.

At the same time, it must be borne in mind that many Loyalists fled the 13 colonies in such haste that time forbade them from bringing with them many cherished material possessions. Moreover, some of those possessions, like slave property, were seized by the rebels. Additionally, enslaved persons often used the confusion of the war to escape from both Loyalist and rebel owners. Some fled into the woods and forests and negotiated freedom on their own terms (e.g., runaways often joined Maroon groups or Native American tribes).

An example of enslaved Africans running off and seeking refuge among First Nations groups during the American Revolution is that of slaves belonging to François Lorimier, who worked as an interpreter with the First Nations at Oswegetchie, adjacent to Ogdensburg, New York. During the Revolutionary War, Lorimier sided with the British and fled to what became Upper Canada. However, his slaves deserted him and took shelter with the Oswegetchie tribe on the American side of the border. When Lorimier attempted to recapture his bondspeople, the Natives defended the Africans and told Lorimier that they would put him to death if he persisted in his attempts to capture the fugitives. Lorimier made a deposition to the Executive Council of Upper Canada on April 14, 1796, in hope of retrieving his enslaved labourers from the Natives (Canadiana, 2017). Such attempts to recover slave labourers were not uncommon at the time. For example, Ona Judge, one of the female slaves owned by Martha Washington, wife of George Washington, escaped from their household during the Revolution. Judge made it to New Hampshire, and though the Washingtons tried for years to capture her, they were not successful in doing so (Armstrong Dunbar, 2017).

We know that when peace was concluded after the Revolution, Cuyler returned at least twice to Albany to recoup his lost property. Was he also trying to regain lost enslaved Africans? Further research on Abraham Cuyler is needed to discover if he indeed was able to travel to

Canada with an entourage of enslaved people. What we know is that when Cuyler arrived in Cape Breton Island, he had Bastian with him. She was then 7 years old.

George More

Research indicates that George More was born in Ireland in 1748. He too was a Loyalist who had come up from the 13 colonies. He was also a naval officer (perhaps retired?) but at the time of the rape he was a member of Cape Breton's Executive Council. Thus, More was a member of Cape Breton's social and political elite. His brother was also a judge and justice of the peace. At the time of the rape, More was 44; Bastian was 15. That she was raped and impregnated by a much older man and then abandoned points to the vulnerable and precarious position of enslaved Black women, who by virtue of their status had no rights or honour, and thus were deemed unworthy of masculine protection (Beckles, 1999).

We can glean from her burial record that Bastian might have harboured the vain hope that More would acknowledge her and their offspring. But according to the document, "she most earnestly implored the favour of Mr. More's brother, the justice, to be admitted to her oath concerning her pregnancy by him, but was refused that with every other assistance by him of them."

Cape Breton historian Kenneth Donovan (2013) writes about the rape of Black women slaves in Cape Breton:

> Whether they were aboard…slave ships during the Middle Passage or labouring in the cane fields of the…West Indies, female slaves were sexually assaulted by white males…so it should come as no surprise that female slaves in Ile Royale (Cape Breton) were also subject to rape and sexual harassment. (pp. 1).

For the time period Donovan looks at, he notes the presence of mulatto children mothered by slave women, and fathered by their White enslavers (Donovan, 1995, 2007).

Harvey Amani Whitfield (2012) in discussing the Bastian case notes that

> her vulnerability as a female slave denied her the possibility of obtaining anything from More or his brother as judge. More being a member of the Executive Council and a naval officer, the elite of Cape Breton were not willing to hold one of their own accountable for his actions. More's racial identity and class status trumped the fact that he had raped and impregnated a young enslaved teenager. In the end, the Executive Council, local society, and the legal system rebuked her pleas because of her gender, race, and slave status. (p. 17)

Surely, Bastian recognized the deep gulf that existed between her and More. She was a Black slave girl, and as such, a social outcast without any rights, honour, or privileges. As a result, she was disposable. More was a White elite gentleman, a naval officer, a member of the Governor's Council, and a free and honourable man. The writer of the burial document described Bastian as "deluded," suggesting that her naïveté caused her ruin.

Simply put, Bastian was Abraham Cuyler's slave and George More sexually victimized her and caused her death. Cuyler then, as a result of losing both Bastian and one of the twins, lost his property rights and economic gain in her and her offspring. In other words, More had ruined his property. How did Cuyler respond to this? Both he and More sat on the Executive Council. They were colleagues—elite men who ran the business of the colony.

At the time of Bastian's death, Abraham Cuyler was out of the colony. He had travelled to Montreal on business. On his return to Cape Breton, he liquidated his assets and left for greener

pastures. Thus, it could be that Bastian was fair prey for More because her owner was not around, and hence could not offer Bastian whatever protection he deigned to give her. But more than likely, More could still have had his way with Bastian even if her master was around. Whether or not Cuyler was angry at the loss of his slave girl and his investments in her, the elite of Cape Breton closed ranks around the passing of Bastian and protected George More.

The rape of Bastian was a non-issue because the gendered racist ideology at the time declared that Black women were "unrapeable." As a result, George More literally got away with murder. By the time of Bastian's rape, White people had gained ascendency as a superior and privileged racial caste who wielded what scholar Edward Baptist (2014) called "a right-handed" power that wreaked havoc on Black people and their lives (pp. 89-90).

But there were a few people in Sydney who were outraged. Someone took the time to record Bastian's death and burial, and they were far from pleased. Maria, daughter of one Major Jeremiah Allen, as well as Philip Starling and Mrs. Moffat (who both served as sponsors of the surviving twin), ensured that we today would know about Bastian—of her sorrow, her ruin, and her death, and the utter callousness of George More and his brother.

Giving Birth in Bondage

Slave laws dictated that enslaved women "bore children who belonged to the slaveowner from the moment of their conception" (Roberts, 1999, p. 23). This was exemplified in the principle of *partus sequitur ventrum*, meaning that children born to slave woman inherited the (enslaved) condition of their mother (J. L. Morgan, 2004; Riddell, 1920). Thus, the owner of the child was not the mother but the owner of the mother—in this case, Abraham Cuyler. One of Bastian's babies died during labour and the surviving child, according to the burial records, was baptized, and possibly put into foster care. It is not known if Cuyler eventually claimed the surviving child or sold it. What becomes evident is that Bastian had very little support or care during her pre-pregnancy, pregnancy, and subsequent labour. The terse, deliberate, and chilly language of the burial record paints a picture of Bastian as someone who had no advocate, and who was callously used, abused, ostracized, and discarded by George More. Implicitly, his brother, the judge, was also condemned as part of the abusive duo.

In 1792, Cape Breton was a marginal colony within the British Empire, but it was adding its own story to that of the turbulent histories of the revolutionary Atlantic. Black people like Bastian were part of this turbulent history, and those who were slaves, like Bastian, moved along the ocean's migratory circuits, their bodies commodified and used for the comfort and wealth of those who owned them. Upon Bastian's body was writ large the violent, dehumanizing, racist, and gendered history of slavery in the Americas. Moreover, Bastian's story illuminates how the construction of a colonial race ideology and a raced gender discourse emerged in British North America. Additionally, it takes us into the world of Loyalist migration, slave movement and displacement in the northern colonies, colonial ambitions of White men, and the ever-present metalanguage of race on Black women's sexuality (Higginbotham, 1992). It also centres more than ever the privilege White men possessed on the colonial frontier.

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