Reconsidering the Underground Railroad: Slavery and Racialization in the Making of the Canadian State

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Abstract

The Underground Railroad is commonly understood as a defining moment in the ideology of the Canadian state regarding the legacy of racism and anti-racism. This paper attempts to recast the narrative of the Underground Railroad through the lens of an anti-imperialist, anti-racist political economy, departing from the view of Canada's anti-racist rescue of fugitive slaves from racist America. The Underground Railroad was in fact the product primarily of the struggle for self-emancipation of American black slaves. The central place of these actors as agents of their own freedom struggle needs to be recognized and restored, taken as a theoretical and historical starting point in explaining the pre-history of Confederation. The British North American colonies served as a safe space for fugitive slaves as a result of realpolitik; racism and a culture of hegemonic whiteness were endemic to the early origins of the Canadian state. This analysis is placed in the context of current and historical discussions of anti-racism and anti-imperialism.

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