

People as property: Representations of slaves in early American newspaper advertisements

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Abstract:

Using van Leeuwen's (1996) categories of social actor representations, this paper investigates the ways in which slaves were represented in four types of slavery-related advertisements (for sale, want to buy, runaways and captured runaways). The materials consist of 860 notices in total, and they are collected from eighteenth and nineteenth -century newspapers in Massachusetts, New York, Virginia and South Carolina. Of particular interest are the two aspects simultaneously present in slavery: how the advertisements can represent their subjects, on the one hand, as human individuals and, on the other hand, as someone's property. The study examines, for example, the use of nomination and various kinds of categorization strategies used to represent the slaves, as well as the ways in which they are explicitly referred to as "property". Examination of the advertisements shows that the representational strategies differ somewhat depending on the type of advertisement as well as the geographical area. Furthermore, the various representational possibilities also indicate that the advertisers could, by their word choices, choose either to highlight the slaves' status as property or to leave it more implicit in the texts.

1 Introduction

Anyone browsing the advertising columns of 18th and 19th-century American newspapers will hardly be able to avoid advertisements concerning slaves. Advertisements offering slaves for sale were found next to ones selling horses, plots of land and all kinds of other goods. On the other hand, when slaves ran away, the notices that the owners placed to regain their property were not very different from ones placed for white indentured servants and apprentices. Though the latter were bound to serve their masters, their servitude was for a limited time. Amid other groups living in the social margins, slaves alone were legally considered the permanent property of their owner, and could thus be considered to occupy the lowest rung of social hierarchy. While slavery in America ended with the Civil War, its cruel legacy still casts a shadow over contemporary American society and the racist attitudes that underpinned the system have not disappeared from modern discourses.

Slavery and its varied aspects have naturally been a topic of great interest for scholars from many different fields. The current study examines how slaves are represented in four types of slavery advertisements, taken from Massachusetts, New York, Virginia and South Carolina newspapers from the early decades of the 18th century to the 1860s. The particular aspect of interest for this study is that of slaves' unique position as human property belonging to someone. With the help of van Leeuwen's (1996) categories for the representation of social actors, I examine the lexical choices made in the advertisements to characterize the slaves and their owners, and how the reality of people as property gets represented in the advertising section of early American newspapers. In the following section I introduce van Leeuwen's framework and the categories relevant for this study. Section 3 discusses the selection of the materials, which I then analyze in section 4.

2 Representing social actors

Slavery advertisements were written by slave owners, sheriffs with captured runaways in their jails, professional slave brokers and other people with an interest in upholding the slave system. As Bradley (1998: 25–26) notes, “for the price of an advertisement, the slave owner was free to [...] dispense and disperse attitudes that were most useful to the slave-owning community”. The power and control exercised by certain groups in society over others, and how it is reflected in language is a central concern in critical discourse analysis, in which field van Leeuwen's (1996) framework of social actor representations is situated. Interested in examining the representations given to social reality in texts, van Leeuwen has created categories to aid in analyzing “the different ways in which social actors can be represented in English discourse” (1996: 32). Though he also discusses the linguistic features that are the characteristic realizations of particular types of representation, it is the *sociosemantic* categories rather than their linguistic realizations that serve as the starting point of his framework. Van Leeuwen draws attention to the fact that to choose one representational strategy over another is not inconsequential and can also be used to further ideological causes. As my goal is to examine how the slave owners and others chose to represent their human chattel (and themselves in relation to it), this framework seems suitable for my purposes.

Firstly, van Leeuwen notes that it is possible for social actors to be *excluded* from a text, even if the actions themselves are still present in it. The most typical realization of this is passive agent deletion. The exclusion can be complete, leaving no mention of a particular social actor in the text, or the suppression can happen in connection with a particular activity, the social actor being mentioned elsewhere in the text. When social actors are included in the text, one point of interest is *role allocation*, which focuses on whether the participants in the text are *activated* or *passivated*, i.e.

represented as "active, dynamic forces in an activity" or as undergoing it (1996: 43–44). Activated social actors are the ones presented as doing (or saying, feeling, etc.) something, whereas passivated social actors become the objects of these actions.

Another division is between *individualization* and *assimilation*. In the former, social actors are referred to as individuals in the text; in the latter, they are referred to as groups. These group representations are realized either by using plurals or a noun denoting a group of people, e.g. "this nation" (van Leeuwen 1996: 48-49). Social actors can also be represented as groups more indirectly by *association*. By this, van Leeuwen (1996: 50) refers to "groups formed by social actors and/or groups of social actors [...] which are never labeled in the text", typically realized by parataxis. These groups are by nature temporary and can be treated as a group only concerning a specific activity (e.g. van Leeuwen provides an example from a text where "politicians, bureaucrats and ethnic minorities" are represented as a group with common interests on a specific matter).

Representations can also be divided into *nomination* and *categorization*. *Nomination* occurs when social actors are represented "in terms of their unique identity", most often realized by proper names. In *categorization* the representation is achieved by using identities and functions that are shared with others (van Leeuwen 1996: 52). Categorization is further divided into *functionalization* (categories related to "what people do") and various types of *identification* (categories related to "what people (more or less permanently) are"). The former includes e.g. occupational terms, the latter ones refer e.g. to age, gender, class, ethnicity, or a personal, kinship or work relation.

Finally, while the above mentioned options all fall under *personalization* (i.e. the representational choices represent the social actors as human beings), another option is *impersonalization*. This occurs where the social actors are represented by abstract or concrete nouns which lack the semantic feature 'human'. This happens for instance when "social actors are represented by means of a quality assigned to them by the representation", e.g. when migrants are referred to in a text as "problems" (van Leeuwen 1996: 59).

This overview does not include all the categories in van Leeuwen's model. Van Leeuwen himself notes that one text never contains examples of all the possible categories (1996: 35), and as the framework is based on a corpus of varying kinds of texts (news stories, comic strips, scholarly essays, fictional narratives, etc.), it is to be expected that not all the categories will be relevant for discussing the slavery advertisements of this study. I have thus omitted covering here e.g. the various types of

overdetermination, the examples of which van Leeuwen mostly draws from fictional texts (1996: 61-65). Likewise, in his model, van Leeuwen further divides some of the categories discussed above into subcategories (e.g. the use of *formalisation*, *titulation*, etc. in connection to *nomination*), but such a detailed approach falls outside the scope of the current paper.

3 Choosing the materials

For this study, I wanted materials from several colonies/states¹ that vary in regards to slavery, in order to investigate whether there are differences also in the language of the advertisements. An additional criterion was the availability of newspapers from fairly early on in the 18th century. A brief overview of the differences in slavery in the four states chosen is given in 3.1. The four advertisement types are described in 3.2 and the selection process for the materials and the methodology in 3.3.

3.1 Regional differences in slavery

Massachusetts, New York, Virginia and South Carolina were by no means identical concerning slavery. The main distinction is between the northern "societies with slaves" and the southern "slave societies" – the latter societies' heavy reliance on the production of labor-intensive crops like tobacco, rice and cotton created the demand for a large unfree work force, whereas in the former, slavery's economic significance was much smaller (Davis 2006: 128).

Although having black slaves as house servants had been the norm for well-to-do white families in the north (Davis 2006: 152), slaves never accounted for more than about 2% of the population of Massachusetts (Kolchin 1993: 240). In New York, which had the largest slave population in the north, slaves formed over 10% of the overall population for most of the 18th century (Kolchin 1993: 240). Of the two, Massachusetts was also the first to abandon slavery, as changing public opinion and judicial decisions put an end to it in the early 1780s (Davis 2006: 152), whereas New York passed gradual abolition laws in 1779 and finally freed all remaining slaves in 1827.

In the south, Virginia was home to the largest number of slaves in North America, whereas South Carolina, though smaller in population size, had the greatest ratio of slaves to free whites, its slave population surpassing the white several times in the 18th and 19th centuries (Kolchin 1993: 240, 242). Though slavery remained entrenched in both states until the end of the Civil War, South Carolina, with its rice and cotton plantations creating a steady need for slaves, was more reliant on

¹ To avoid this cumbersome expression, I will hereon refer to them as states, despite the term being inaccurate when referring to these geographical areas before 1776.

slave labor than Virginia. As a consequence, it continued importing new slaves from Africa until the trade was banned in 1808. Likewise, abolitionist ideas and voluntary manumission of slaves, which had some temporary popularity in Virginia around the 1780s, never managed to gain much ground in South Carolina (Berlin 1992 [1975]: 28–29, 86–88).

3.2 The four advertisement types

This study focuses on four different types of notices that I will refer to as "for sale" (1), "want to buy" (2), "runaways" (3) and "captured runaways" (4).

- (1) TO BE SOLD, A very likely Negro Wench, about 16 Years old – Inquire of the Printers.
(*Boston Gazette* 7-6-1767)
- (2) WANTED TO PURCHASE, A COMPLEAT negro or mulatto woman, for a family, to act in the capacity of a head Servant : She must be a good Seamstress, understand clear Starching, and making up fine cloaths. Enquire of the printer. (*New-York Gazette, and Weekly Mercury* 7-7-1777)
- (3) THIRTY DOLLARS REWARD. - Run away from the Subscriber some time last summer, a negro man named REUBEN, 5 feet 8 inches high - no particular mark recollected, except one on his right hand, which has been badly burnt. I will give the above reward to any person who will deliver the said Negro to me, or secure him in Jail so that I get him. JAMES WILLS, Sen. (*Enquirer* 7-1-1817)
- (4) Brought to the Gaol of this District, on the 31st ult. a Negro Woman, who says her name is *Rose*, 4 feet 11 inches high, has a scar on her right cheek, yellow complexion ; and says she belongs to a Mr. Benjamin Thomson, residing in Barnwell District. J.L. RUMPH, Sheriff. (*City Gazette* 7-2-1821)

The groups are on the whole rather self-explanatory. "For sale" notices announce the sale of a slave or slaves – example (1) is a short and simple one. Notices announcing the sale of a whole cargo of slaves, the sale of slave property by the sheriff to satisfy debtors, etc. can look quite different. The much rarer "want to buy" notices (example 2) express the advertiser's interest in purchasing one or several slaves. Notices about "runaways" (example 3), placed by the slave owners themselves or someone acting on their behalf, inform the public of the escape of a slave and typically offer a reward for his or her recapture. Finally, "captured runaways" notices (example 4), usually written by sheriffs and jailors, describe runaways that have been confined e.g. in jail. Although focusing on these four cases covers most of the slave-related advertising in the newspapers, mentions of slaves occur also in some other advertisements. The most common type omitted from this study is notices

concerning the hiring of slaves (however, if an advertisement is e.g. offering a sale "for sale or hire", they have been included in the "for sale" category).

These advertisements provide a wealth of information for scholars interested in slavery and have received plenty of attention. Particularly runaway notices (including ones for captured runaways) from specific areas or time periods have been collected in books (e.g. Bly 2012, Hodges and Brown 1994, Smith and Wojtovich 1989) as well as various online databases (e.g. *The Geography of Slavery in Virginia*²), and used to discover more about various aspects of slaves' lives and how they resisted slavery (e.g. Mullin 1972, Franklin and Schweninger 1999, Waldstreicher 1999; see also Bly 2012 for an overview). For sale notices have been studied by Desrochers (2002) to map the development of slavery in Massachusetts. Most of the studies approach these texts from a historian's perspective, and analyses focusing on language are rare (see however, Bradley [1998: 25–44] on how the language of Revolutionary era slave advertisements is used to construct the idea that black slaves were best suited for slavery and not freedom). The current study approaches these materials from this more linguistic perspective, focusing on the lexical choices used to represent slaves.

3.3 Collecting and analyzing the advertisements

The advertisements were collected from newspaper issues accessed through the online databases *America's Historical Newspapers (Readex)* and, in the case of pre-1780s South Carolina issues, *Accessible Archives*. In order to obtain a sufficient amount of data from the northern ones and, on the other hand, to keep the number of advertisements from the southern ones manageable, the samples were constructed so that one issue from each year was chosen in the case of Massachusetts and New York, and one from every other year in the case of Virginia and South Carolina. This still results in fewer advertisements from the north, and one must be cautious when drawing conclusions from the relatively smaller number of advertisements. However, they can still serve as points of comparison to the tendencies observed in the more numerous advertisements from Virginia and South Carolina. The issue chosen was the first issue for July (or the next available issue that year),³ switching between different newspapers when more than one title was available. The number of advertisements thus collected can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Number of advertisements per colony/state

² <http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/>

³ It was assumed that the time of year would not be significant as to the features examined in this study, though it may have some effect on what types of advertisements are most likely. E.g. fewer runaways escaped during autumn than other seasons (Franklin & Schweninger 1999: 231) and for instance in Massachusetts the slave importing season lasted from late spring to early autumn (Desrochers 2002: 656).

	years	for sale	wanted to purchase	runaways	captured runaways	in total
Massachusetts	1706–1781	69	3	24	0	96
New York	1738–1824	75	7	86	1	169
Virginia	1751–1863	97	14	100	28	239
South Carolina	1751–1863	156	16	130	54	356
						860

The years in the table indicate the first and last issues where slave advertisements were found. Several earlier and later issues were also consulted, but using the sampling methods mentioned above did not result in any advertisements. The years in Table 1 include several years when no advertisements were in the paper (Massachusetts 12, New York 18, Virginia 1 and South Carolina 1)⁴ or there was no surviving issue in the database (Massachusetts 1, Virginia 5 and South Carolina 1).

As *America's Historical Newspapers* contains the papers only in image format, the advertisements had to be located by going through the newspaper issues and then transcribed. *Accessible Archives* has the newspapers also in text format. As mentioned in 3.2, collections of runaway notices do exist for certain time periods and areas, but I am not aware of any similar ones for the "for sale" / "want to buy" notices, so collecting the materials directly from the newspapers was seen as the best option. Though it is a time-consuming process (and thus also putting limits on the size of my corpus), it enabled me to observe the advertisements in their newspaper context, and the notices they appeared alongside with. The number of advertisements was also intentionally kept at a size that is manageable without special corpus tools. Collecting the advertisements, it became apparent that slaves (and their status as property) are represented in such various ways that only searching for specific phrases would not reveal the whole picture. Instead a close reading of the advertisements was felt necessary to examine the topic of this study.

4 Analyzing the representations

I begin this section with a discussion of the various ways that the people writing the notices had at their disposal for referring to the slaves they advertised for. In 4.2 I move on to the representation of the owners and how these representations reflect the connection between them and their human

⁴ This happens particularly in the early issues which had very few advertisements of any kind, or in the latter years when slavery itself and thus also slave advertisements were disappearing from the north.

chattel. 4.3 focuses on the representations of slaves particularly as a type of "property". In all the sections, I will provide examples from my materials, some numbers on how common the features were in the four states and the four different advertisement types, and discuss the reasons and possible repercussions of such representational choices.

4.1 Slaves, Negroes, wenches, coopers or Charlotte: How are slaves referred to?

Before moving on to the various lexical representations of the slaves, I will start by noting that their role allocation varies depending on the advertisement type. In the case of "for sale" and "want to buy" notices, the slaves are clearly passivated, as they are presented as someone/something that "will be sold" from one person to the next. Likewise, captured runaway notices start with phrases like "brought to the workhouse", or "taken up" – again placing the slaves as objects of other people's actions. Runaway notices are the obvious exception here, as even their typical start "ran away" presents the slave as an active participant⁵.

The type of advertisement has also a significant role on whether the slaves are individualized or only treated as groups (i.e. assimilation). The two types of notices concerning runaways naturally deal with individual slaves, and this is also true for many "for sale" and "want to buy" advertisements. These latter types, however, often also deal with larger numbers of slaves:

- (5) ... we shall proceed to sell, by public auction [...] **the following Slaves: Bob, a blacksmith; Randolph, a young man; Meredith, Armstead and Winston, lads; and Hannah, a woman ...** (*Richmond Whig* 7-4-1843, **bolding in all the examples mine**)
- (6) JUST imported from *Africa*, and to be Sold [...] A Number of likely **NEGRO BOYS and GIRLS** [...] **The above Slaves** have all had the Small-Pox. (*Boston Gazette* 7-3-1758)

In cases like (5), though initially referred to as a group, the slaves are afterwards individualized. In other cases, like (6), they are only represented as groups. Presented as merchandise, these nameless groups can be quantified with expressions like "sundry", "a parcel" or "a cargo" (see example (10) later), which further draws attention away from the fact that these groups consist of individuals.

The representation of slaves in the advertisements relies heavily on categorization, i.e. representations in terms of identities and functions a person shares with others. Particularly central is identification in terms of race, often combined with gender:

⁵ This does not mean that an advertisement cannot contain both activation and passivation. E.g. a slave that "ran away" may also be described as having been "purchased of" someone. Conversely, in some "for sale" notices expressions like "sold by her own desire" make the slave at least slightly more of an active participant in the described action.

- (7) RUN-away [...] **a negro fellow** named **Jerry** [...] Whoever takes up and secures **the said negro** [...] (*New-York Mercury* 7-1-1754)
- (8) Was committed to the Jail [...] **a Negro man** who calls himself **George** [...] Any person claiming **said Negro man** will prove his property [...] (*Richmond Whig* 7-1-1853)
- (9) FOR Sale, a **black Woman**, aged 27 years (**a slave**, with or without **her female child** of 2 1/2 years old) ... (*New-York Gazette* 7-1-1811)

Functionalization (i.e. "what people do") also plays some role, particularly in the "for sale" notices, where information on the slaves' occupation is particularly relevant. In (5), for instance, after the whole group has first been categorized as "slaves", "Bob" is further represented by functionalization ("blacksmith"), the others by categorizations of gender and age.

There is also some use of what van Leeuwen calls *relational* identification (1996: 56): the slaves being represented in terms of their personal or kinship relation to each other. E.g. a fugitive can be described as having run away "with his wife" (who is then further described in terms of skin color, etc.). This type of representation makes more visible the fact that these people were not just the property of their owners but also had family lives of their own. However, examples like (9) reflect how, while the owners might acknowledge such kinship relations in the language of the advertisements, they might not place much value on them in practice.

Identification by the label "slave" is, overall, rather rare in the advertisements. This is worth pointing out, as it is also the only label that includes not only the semantic feature 'human', but also 'property of someone'. There is a curious difference between Virginia and the three other states – while the others refer to "slaves" in less than 10% of their notices, in Virginia this percentage is around 26%. Race being the defining feature in who could be bound to lifelong servitude and who could not,⁶ it is perhaps not surprising that "Negro" and "slave" seem synonymous to many advertisers. This interchangeability of the two can be illustrated by comparing advertisements taken from the same newspaper issue:

- (10) *Prime Windward Coast Slaves*. The sale of the Sloop *Baltimore's* Cargo, consisting of 80 PRIME **SLAVES**, will open THIS DAY, at Gadsden's Wharf.

⁶ Native Americans were also sometimes enslaved, but their use as slaves was quite marginal compared to people of African origins (Kolchin 1993: 7–8). In my data, two early Massachusetts advertisements offer for sale an "Indian woman" and an "Indian girl", and two runaways are described as being a "Spanish Indian Slave" and an "Indian Girl". In New York, one runaway is described as "Indian slave".

Prime Angola Negroes. – The Sale of the Schooner *Ann & Harriot's* Cargo of 115 Prime **NEGROES**, will commence on board THIS Morning, at 10 o'clock. (Charleston Courier 7-1-1807)

People of African origin being considered to be slaves unless proven otherwise (Berlin 1992 [1975]: 37), the infrequent use of “slave” compared to e.g. “Negro” is not particularly unexpected. It is, however, not irrelevant. Intentionally or not, it reinforces the idea that skin color and the status of slave go hand in hand. The fact that not all people of African origin *were* slaves does not seem to concern the majority of advertisers much, and the word “Negro” seems sufficient to indicate that person’s status in society in most advertisements. The exceptions to this rule, “free Negroes” occasionally get a mention in runaway notices as possible harborers of runaways.

In fact, sometimes choosing to use the label “slave” seems to have been out of concern that this status was not immediately decipherable from the person's skin color. For instance, example (9) comes from New York in 1811, when gradual emancipation was well underway in the state. Another case are runaway notices for lighter skinned fugitives, where the advertisers’ concerns can be illustrated by the notice seeking to reclaim “Grandeson, a man about 25 years of age, a coarse carpenter, is remarkably white for a slave, and might be readily taken for a white” (*Enquirer* 7-5-1825). In New York runaway notices, 7 out of the 19 notices concerning “mulatto” runaways refer to the runaway as a “slave” at some point, whereas the other 67 runaway notices use the word “slave” only 3 times.⁷ Similarly, in Virginia, of the 31 “mulatto” runaways, 9 are referred to as “slaves”, compared to 11 instances in the other 69 runaway notices.⁸ Maybe the looser link between slavery and skin color could also partially explain the difference between Virginian and South Carolinian use of “slave” in the advertisements in general – as Virginia had a larger population of free black people than South Carolina⁹, it could cause them to refer to “slaves” rather than “Negroes” in the advertisements a bit more readily than South Carolinians.

However, labels for both race and slave status can sometimes be omitted, leaving only terms referring to the gender and/or the occupation of the person, like in examples (11) and (12):

(11) Wanted to Purchase, A GOOD **JOBING CARPENTER.** ... (*Charleston Courier* 7-1-1829)

⁷ One of these being the “Indian slave” of previous footnote.

⁸ Only cases where the word “mulatto” is used are counted here. It should be kept in mind that the advertisers might not always use the word “mulatto” for slaves of mixed ancestry, but rather refer to them as “negro”. At least two of the 11 other Virginian advertisements using “slave” were for a “Negro” with a “light (yellow) complexion”.

⁹ It ranged from 4.2% of the population in 1790 to 10.6% in 1869 in Virginia, whereas in South Carolina the percentage never even reached 3% (Berlin 1992 [1975]: 47, 137)

- (12) ... will be sold [...] **BETTY, an elderly woman**, a first rate **washer and ironer**. (*Charleston Courier* 7-1-1851)

This happens particularly in South Carolinian "for sale" notices. In cases where the advertisement also includes nomination (as in example 12), the use of first name only can also be considered an additional clue to the status and race of the person in question. Nevertheless, in these cases the main thing that reveals the people in question as slaves is role allocation, the fact that they are being sold.

Finally, in regards to nomination, there are two broad tendencies. In the two types of notices concerning runaways, the slaves are almost always named, whereas the ones offered for sale usually remain nameless. There are, nevertheless, some regional differences in the anonymity of slaves for sale: the southern ones contain several examples like (5) and (12). Such cases occur particularly from the 1830s onwards, which seems to indicate some shift in conventions. There might be practical reasons for naming the slaves, e.g. in estate sales names can inform the readers exactly which slaves of that particular estate are up for sale. However, example (12) is posted by an auctioneer, with no indication of "Betty's" previous owner. So, while most advertisers marketed their slaves only by representing them by their race, age, skills and other qualities (thus obscuring their unique identity), others saw some benefit in an opposite approach.

The prevalence of nomination in notices concerning runaways is to be expected, as the individual identities of slaves are important for their identification and recapture. Names are, however, not usually the primary way of referring to them in these advertisements, but often treated more like just one identifying detail alongside others like height, age, etc. Examples like (13), which start with nomination, are rare. Likewise, instances where the slave is referred to by name several times, like in (14), are an exception.

- (13) Runaway from my Plantation, in Sumter District, **ALICK, a bright mulatto**, [...]; **said boy** is quick spoken ... (*Charleston Courier* 7-1-1851)

- (14) RAN-AWAY [...] a **NEGRO WOMAN** named **CHARLOTTE** [...] **Charlotte** was formerly purchased by [...] The above reward will be paid to any person who will apprehend **Charlotte** [...] (*City Gazette* 7-1-1803)

Usually, if there is need to refer to the person several times in an advertisement (as often happens in runaway notices), it is done either with pronouns, omitting the subject altogether or, as happens in examples (7), (8) and (13), by referring to the race, gender, etc. of the person. It seems like most

advertisers thus refrain from individualizing their slaves too much by favoring categorization over nomination.

Table 2 sums up the use of some of these features in the various advertisement types in the four states. The figures in this and the following tables represent how many advertisements contain the mentioned feature at least once (i.e. it does not show whether an advertisement uses e.g. "slave" for the persons in question only once or several times).

Table 2: Representing the slaves in the advertisements

	named	<i>slave</i>	reference to skin color (<i>negro, mulatto, black, etc.</i>)	neither skin color ¹⁰ nor the word <i>slave</i> mentioned
Massachusetts:				
for sale (69)	0	4	68	0
want to buy (3)	0	1	2	0
runaways (24)	23	1	24	0
New York:				
for sale (75)	0	6	70	1
want to buy (7)	0	0	7	0
runaways (86)	84	10	86	0
captured (1)	0	0	1	0
Virginia:				
for sale (97)	14	33	58	5
want to buy (14)	0	5	12	0
runaways (100)	100	20	100	0
captured (28)	26	5	28	0
South Carolina:				
for sale (156)	27	18	115	30
want to buy (16)	0	0	11	5
runaways (130)	127	6	126	4
captured (54)	36	2	54	0

4.2 Owners and masters

¹⁰ Though in the south "fellow" and "wench" became to be used particularly when referring to people of color, I have not considered "fellow" and "wench" alone to be a reference to skin color, but only to gender (as most advertisers still use phrases like "Negro Wench").

This section shifts the focus to another social actor involved in the reality of slavery – namely, the owners of the slaves. More precisely, I will examine how their representations in the advertisements are connected to the representations of the slaves themselves. Under consideration are references not only to the present owners but also past ones. In addition to nouns and possessive constructions, I have also examined the use of the verbs *own* and *belong to*, as they are another way of making explicit the ownership relation between these two groups of social actors. If Person X owns Person Y (or, conversely, Person Y belongs to Person X), Person X is represented as an owner and Person Y as his or her property.

An important point to consider is that the owners are not necessarily represented in the advertisements at all. Here, I am only considering instances where the ownership link between the slave-owner and the slave is somehow made explicit (the owner can of course also be present in the text e.g. via proper name at the end of the notice, without stating overtly that he or she owns the slave in question). The exclusion of the owners altogether is typical in notices seeking to buy and sell slaves (see e.g. example 1), as mentions of current owners are often irrelevant for the purpose of the notice. We can also see the possibility of a choice between including or excluding reference to the owner e.g. when reporting on the reasons for sale: "*the owner having no occasion for him*" contrasting with "*for want of Employment*". One consequence of the exclusion is also that it creates an image of a reality where slaves are offered for sale but nobody is actively put in the role of a people-seller. In the notices concerning runaways, references to the owner are more crucial to the overall communicative purpose of the text.

"Master", "owner" and "proprietor" are all labels used to represent the slave owners:

- (15) Eloped from **his present owner** [...] a NEGRO FELLOW... (*City Gazette* 7-1-1809)
- (16) RAN away from **her Master** Isaac White of Boston Shipwright, a Negro Wench ... (*Boston Gazette* 7-4-1737)
- (17) At Private Sale, [...] a NEGRO WOMAN [...] whose character will be fairly and impartially given by **her Proprietor** to any person seriously disposed to become a purchaser (*City Gazette* 7-2-1821)

These words are, however, not identical in meaning. "Master" can be applied to a wide variety of relationships where a person has some authority over another, and Noah Webster in his 1828 dictionary offers this definition: "A man who rules, governs or directs either men or business. A man who owns slaves is their master; he who has servants is their master; he who has apprentices is their master." As the wording of Webster's definition suggests, unlike (white) servants and apprentices,

slaves are “owned” and thus their masters are also their owners.¹¹ Therefore, though the slave's owner was simultaneously both, the choice of "owner" (as well as "proprietor") stresses the fact that slaves were property, whereas "master" conveys the idea that slaves were a type of servant.

When examining possessive constructions (in which the owners are represented by possessive pronouns or genitive forms), these two aspects are not easily separable. On the one hand, possessives can be used for identification when representing people in terms of their personal, kinship or work relation (van Leeuwen 1996: 56), but they are also essentially used for signaling ownership. A case where a reward is offered e.g. for the recapture of "my servant Toney" (*Charleston Courier* 7-1-1841) probably falls more into the first type, as the possessive is used to indicate the position the slave has in the household. On the other hand, someone informing the public of the escape of "my Negro Man Slave" (*Virginia Gazette* 11-30-1759) or a jailor noting that he has recaptured "John H. Norton's SAMSON" (*Virginia Gazette and Weekly Advertiser* 12-13-1783) are more easily interpreted as signaling ownership. In many cases, both interpretations are possible.

Table 3 draws together the various ways how the owners are represented in the four types of advertisements:

Table 3: Representing the owners in the advertisements

	<i>master</i> ¹²	<i>owner</i>	<i>proprietor</i>	possessives	<i>belong to</i> (person)	<i>own</i>
Massachusetts:						
for sale (69)	1	0	0	0	3	0
want to buy (3)	0	0	0	0	0	0
runaways (24)	19	0	0	1	0	0
New York:						
for sale (75)	3	3	0	0	0	0
want to buy (7)	0	0	0	0	0	1
runaways (86)	42	1	0	0	4	0
captured (1)	0	0	0	0	0	0
Virginia:						
for sale (97)	0	1	1	0	1	0

¹¹ In reality, the distinction is not quite as clear-cut. White indentured servants are also occasionally referred to as having “owners”: e.g. a runaway notice for “Irish servant men” ending with “so that their owners may get them again” (*Virginia Journal and Alexandria Advertiser* 7-5-1787)

¹² The numbers include one "Mistress" in Massachusetts and New York runaway notices.

want to buy (14)	0	1	0	0	0	0
runaways (100)	2	2	0	10	3	1
captured (28)	5	23	0	1	15	0
South Carolina:						
for sale (156)	0	9	1	3	2	0
want to buy (16)	0	0	0	0	0	0
runaways (130)	4	3	0	23	20	5
captured (54)	7	8	0	0	42	0

Examining how these various expressions are used in the different advertisements reveals several tendencies. Firstly, in runaway notices in the north, references to "masters" are quite typical (e.g. example 16), which is not the case in the south. Perhaps because northern slaves typically worked as house servants, using the word most connected with the master-servant relationship was felt to be most fitting. The fact that many Virginian and South Carolinian runaways were field hands, not house servants, might offer some explanation for this difference, but there were still also plenty of slave servants running away in the south. Though the southern runaway advertisers sometimes also made some use of possessive constructions or the other means discussed to indicate the slave belonging to a certain person, in many cases such an explicit link between the slave and the owner is missing altogether. In practice, this means using expressions like "ran away, a negro man, from the subscriber/the subscriber's plantation" (see example 3 in 3.2). Worth noting in this connection is also that most of the instances of *belong(ed) to* in runaway notices do not refer to present owners but previous ones, as happens in example (18).

(18) RUN AWAY [...] a well-set tall negro man [...] **formerly belonging to Robert Screven** (*South Carolina Gazette* 7-7-1759)

"Captured runaways" is the type of advertisement that is by far the most likely to refer to slave-owners by the label "owner". Typically, this happens at the end of the notice as the jailor announces what action is required to reclaim the runaways:

(19) **The owner** is requested to come forward and prove his property and take him away, or he will be dealt with according to law. (*Enquirer* 7-5-1825)

However, not all these notices contain this final sentence (it is more common in Virginia than in South Carolina), just a description of the captured runaways – the advertiser thus assuming that

those who recognize their slaves from the descriptions will know what the desired course of action is. The jailors also very often report on who the runaway "says his Master is" or who he "says he belongs to"¹³, etc., so also these types of reference to owners are well represented in this advertisement type. This is to be expected, as the jailors' main concern is returning the slaves to their legal owners.

4.3 One type of property among others

The expressions discussed in 4.1 all fall under the scope of personalization, as the references are to categories that include 'human'. The feature of 'property' is also present in e.g. the word "slave" (a person who is the property of someone else) as well as in the roles these people can get in the advertisements. The expressions in 4.2 also show that this ownership can be brought more or less into foreground. In this final section, I will examine how slaves are directly referred to as property. This can be seen as an instance of impersonalization. Table 4 summarizes the use of the word "property" in the notices.

Table 4: Referring to slaves as property

	<i>property</i> (a possession)	<i>property</i> (ownership)
Massachusetts:		
for sale (69)	0	0
want to buy (3)	0	0
runaways (24)	0	0
New York:		
for sale (75)	0	1
want to buy (7)	0	0
runaways (86)	2	0
captured (1)	0	0
Virginia:		
for sale (97)	13	0
want to buy (14)	1	0

¹³ These kinds of examples also illustrate how the fugitives are often activated in the role of sayer in the captured runaway notices. When reporting the names of the runaway and/or the possible owner, the jailor has to rely on the information given by the runaways themselves – presenting the slave as the source of this information leaves open the suggestion that this information (unlike the accompanying physical description) may well be false.

runaways (100)	9	0
captured (28)	8	15
South Carolina:		
for sale (156)	23	7
want to buy (16)	0	1
runaways (130)	16	0
captured (54)	3	4

An examination of the advertisements reveals that "property" is used in two separate meanings. Firstly, to mean "a (usually material) thing belonging to a person [...]; that which one owns; possessions collectively" and secondly "the fact of owning something or of being owned; [...] the (exclusive) right to the possession, use, or disposal of a thing; ownership" (*OED*, s.v. *property*, 3b and 4). The second meaning, referring to the concept of ownership (rather than directly to the slave), occurs in the final sentence of captured runaway notices as the owners are asked to "prove their property" (see example 19) and in "for sale" notices in expressions like (20):

(20) The conditions of the sale to be cash, before **the property** is altered. (*Gazette of the State of South Carolina 7-7-1777*)

The slaves themselves can be referred to as being "property" in various contexts. In captured runaway notices it can be yet another way to announce the (possible) owner of the runaway, as happens in (21):

(21) COMMITTED to the gaol [...] he says he is **the property** of Mr. William Hardyman (*Virginia Gazette 7-18-1771*)

It should be kept in mind that the jailors were not necessarily reporting the fugitives' words (or the words the jailors themselves used in questioning them) verbatim, so we cannot know for sure what terms were actually used during the interaction. However, more slaves are reported to have claimed that they "belong to" rather than are "the property of" someone. In runaway notices, sometimes "property" is used to indicate the current ownership, but as was the case with *belong to*, more often reference is made to former owners.

Other advertisers refer to their runaways as property in more pointed manner. The fact that in (22) the runaways have "entered into his Majesty's service" during the American revolutionary war may well compel the advertiser to stress his property rights to ensure the return of the men currently helping with the war effort. Nor does the advertiser in (23) make any attempt to hide what gives him the right to capture "Bellah".

(22) RUN AWAY on the first day of June instant, three NEGROES, two men and one woman, **the property of George Shaw**, of the city of New-York, tanner. [...] The two negro men have entered into his Majesty's service as waggon drivers, and their names are on the Commissary's books, but are **my property**. (*New-York Gazette, and Weekly Mercury* 7-7-1777)

(23) TEN DOLLARS REWARD, IS offered for BELLAH, the subscriber's Wench who absconded some time since [...] and on proof to conviction of being harbored by a white person or free person of color \$30 will be paid, and if by a slave, \$20, so as **the owner may obtain his property**, and punish those who harbor runaways. (*Charleston Courier* 7-2-1827)

In the "for sale" notices in South Carolina, the references to "property" occur in sheriff's sales, like in (24). Similar phrases occur in connection not only with slaves, but also lands, buildings, furniture, etc. auctioned off to satisfy a judgment. On the other hand, in the Virginian "for sale" notices, all the instances are cases where "property" is used to refer to slaves *and* other types of property together, as happens in (25)¹⁴. However, in instances like the "want to buy" notice (26), the advertiser could well have avoided this impersonalization by writing e.g. "before selling them".

(24) Sheriff's Sales. BY virtue of sundry writs of *Fieri Facias* to me directed, will be sold [...] 12 negroes, field hands. Levied on and to be sold as **the property** of the Estate of Charles Drayton, deceased, at the suit of the Executrix and Executors of Thomas Corbett, deceased ... (*Charleston Courier* 7-1-1823)

(25) ... BY virtue of a deed of trust [...] will be sold [...] TWENTY LIKELY NEGROES, 1 GIG, 2 FINE HORSES, and all the HOUSEHOLD AND KITCHEN FURNITURE of said Rose, or so much of **said property** as will be sufficient for the purposes of said deed. (*Enquirer* 7-3-1821)

¹⁴ In a somewhat similar manner, "estate" can also be used to refer to slaves together with other types of property. In example (24) the slave is indicated to be the property not of a person but rather an estate. In other cases, estates for sale are said to be "consisting of" slaves, horses, etc., or the slaves are described as being "part of the estate" or "belonging to the estate of (a deceased person)".

(26) THE subscriber will pay the highest cash prices for one hundred likely young Negroes [...] All persons coming to this city with Slaves for sale, are requested to give me a call before they sell their **property**. (*Richmond Whig* 7-4-1843)

Finally, I would like to consider examples like (27):

(27) A few Pipes of excellent Madeira Wine, Muscovado Sugar (in Barrels) and a Negro Blacksmith, to be sold reasonable. (*South Carolina Gazette* 7-4-1771)

Van Leeuwen's *association* refers to unlabeled groups formed by social actors, typically realized by parataxis (1996: 50). In this case, the association is not formed between different social actors, but rather with objects and one person. Nevertheless, the parataxis has the same effect: these three are seen as something similar in this particular advertisement. It certainly does not make the wine and sugar seem more human, but rather the "Negro Blacksmith" more like just another type of commodity.

5 Conclusions

The advertisers in 18th and 19th-century America had to balance between two simultaneously true realities: The slaves they were advertising were legally akin to other types of property they owned, but they were also human beings and in many ways similar to other servants. Containing a mixture of individualization and assimilation, different types of categorization, nomination, role allocations and impersonalization, the language of the advertisements includes both these aspects in the representations of the slaves. On the one hand, slaves could be referred to as named individuals, actively running away from their masters; on the other hand, as nameless masses identified as slaves by their skin color, lumped together with other types of property belonging to their owners. In most cases, the resulting picture is a combination of both. Some of this variation can be linked to the type of advertisement, and some different tendencies were also identified between the four states. The various representations present in the advertisements also show that the people writing the advertisements had the power either to highlight or downplay the slaves' position as property in these texts.

Many of the aspects only briefly mentioned in this study could prove fruitful for further research. These include, for instance, changes that happen over time, the representations of other social actors (the general public, jailors, printers of the papers, etc.) or the similarities and differences between slave notices and other types of advertisements. In my PhD dissertation I will examine the language of runaway slave notices in more detail. Hopefully, this study has demonstrated that slave

advertisements are worth studying not only for the historical bits of information they contain, but that shifting the focus to the lexical choices made by the advertisers can also provide new insights.

Finally, Van Leeuwen's inventory of representational categories, created with the needs of contemporary critical discourse analysts in mind, proved a useful tool also in analyzing historical materials, even the relatively short and uniform advertisements of this study. This is not so surprising, as the inequality and racial prejudices displayed in the slave advertisements are closely linked to today's issues of racism and marginalization.

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