

CSWS Research Matters

A Long Way From Home: Colonial Women, Slavery, and the Politics of Place

Writings of colonial women shed light on the gendered and politicized construction of home in the context of British slavery.

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As the British Empire expanded, women's traditional place in the home (always viewed with suspicion by feminists) helped define their contribution to the imperial project: "making new homes away from home" in the colonies.¹ My recent book, *Slavery and the Politics of Place*, culminates with a section on the place called home. My research for this section—funded in part by a CSWS grant, for which I'm deeply grateful—examined the unpublished journals of two white British women, Janet Schaw and Maria Nugent, who spent time in the Caribbean slave colonies. For a contrasting perspective I turned to *The History of Mary Prince* (1831), the only surviving autobiography of an enslaved British woman. Can a slave, I asked, really have a home? These writings by colonial women shed light on the gendered and politicized construction of home in the context of British slavery.

I first had to ask a more basic question: what is home? A home is a dwelling, a place of shelter, normally the residence of a family or household. More than that, though, home has an affective dimension: it's invested with feelings of comfort and intimacy. At the center of the middle-class eighteenth- and nineteenth-century home was the domestic woman, the wife and mother, presiding over its physical and moral or spiritual order. In the context of empire, home took on an additional meaning: "domestic" could denote the interior of the family, or British national territory, thought of as "home" by colonists around the globe. When Schaw and Nugent traveled to the Caribbean to accompany men in colonial service (Schaw's brother a customs clerk, Nugent's husband the Governor of Jamaica), they became bearers of home in both senses. Schaw's journal strives to present colonial life, in particular slavery, as morally acceptable and aesthetically appealing. Nugent's records her contribution to her husband's labor of colonial administration amid the Napoleonic Wars and Haitian Revolution.



John Gabriel Stedman/William Blake, "Flagellation of a Female Samboe Slave," 1796.

White women in the colonial British Caribbean must often have felt out of place. There were few to be seen; Nugent toured Jamaica for a week in 1802 without meeting even one white woman. Men went to the colonies to make their fortune, planning to spend it back home in Britain. Conditions on the islands were not such as to attract or accommodate ladies. Colonial domestic arrangements often involved concubinage with women of color. Nugent remonstrated with young officers about "the miseries that must result from the horrid connections they have formed." She undertook symbolic operations to transform Jamaica's alien space into something more closely resembling "dear England." The colony was dirty, literally and figuratively, in ways that made the Governor's lady want to clean up.

Her agents in this project were those she called "blackies." The government provided the Nugents with thirty-three enslaved workers on arrival; they acquired another ten during their stay. Lady Nugent metaphorically cleaned them up in a couple of ways: first, teaching them their catechism, when she wasn't socializing, complaining about the heat, or suffering from morning sickness (she bore two children, George and Louisa, in Jamaica).

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Slave conversion was controversial, and Nugent was taking a liberal position for 1801. The connection between cleanliness and conversion emerges from her language describing “orderly” slaves at church on her fourth wedding anniversary: “Their wish was, that General N. and I might live happily together, till our hair was as white as their gowns. They don’t know what snow is, or I suppose they would have said snow, rather than gowns; but their muslin was very clean and white.” With their clean clothing, new Christianity, and welcome deference, these sanitized captives made their owner proud, while their ignorance of snow kept them at a safe distance from her real home, England, which they would never see.

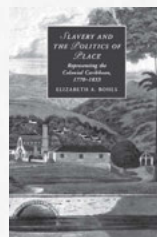
This is just one example of Nugent’s exertions toward the white woman’s duty of making the colony more like home, in the dual sense of domicile and homeland. Despite her best efforts, by the end of her stay, Jamaica remained profoundly unhomey, as rumors of bloody liberation crossed the water from nearby Haiti. She could no longer view the people around her as comfortable “blackies.” They were restless captives, catching the scent of freedom. My next chapter presents a very different perspective on the slave colony and the idea of home. The three women I discuss had one thing in common: they traveled, and their travels empowered each of them in different ways. Schaw and Nugent carried “home” with them to colonial soil. Mary Prince, in contrast, was torn from her family and thrust into white households where domestic labor signified the opposite of comfort or nurturance.



James Hakewill, “Montpelier Estate, St. James’s” 1825.

Having worked as a household slave in Bermuda, Antigua, and finally London, Mary Prince dictated her life story to abolitionists after walking away from her abusive owners. Its 1831 publication formed part of the final push for British emancipation, enacted in 1833. Given the censorship and self-censorship involved in Mary’s collaboration with her editors, *The History of Mary Prince* is a challenging text. Her position as a domestic slave highlights the incongruity between the state of slavery and the concept of “home.” The home should be a place of relaxation, safety, comfort, nurturance, and family togetherness. For the slave, her owners’ houses are

places of near-incessant labor where she is at the mercy of their sadistic impulses. Her first night in one Bermuda household is spent listening to the screams of a fellow slave being beaten. She awakens to a harsh routine of work and punishment: “my mistress . . . taught me to do all sorts of household work: to wash and bake, pick cotton and wool, and wash floors, and cook. And she taught me (how can I ever forget it!) . . . to know the exact difference between the smart of the rope, the cart-whip, and the cow-skin, when applied to my naked body by her own cruel hand.” This home is no haven. At its center is the opposite of the gentle, morally pure middle-class lady. Mary Prince was, in more than one sense—as the old spiritual puts it—a long way from home. ■



—Elizabeth Bohls is a professor in the UO Department of English and the associate department head. She received a CSWS Faculty Research Grant toward research on this book.

Endnotes

1. Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose, “Introduction,” in Hall and Rose, ed., *At Home with the Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 27.