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Inscribing Experience: An American Working Woman and an English Gentlewoman Encounter Jamaica’s Slave Society, 1801–1805

Susan E. Klepp and Roderick A. McDonald

No eyewitness account of Jamaican life and society in the early nineteenth century surpasses Maria Skinner Nugent’s rich and detailed journal of her four-year residence there. Her much-cited diary is a standard reference for Jamaican and Caribbean history. Yet despite Nugent’s prominence in the historical literature of the Caribbean, women’s perspectives remain scarce. This deficiency is unfortunate because Anglo-American married women’s experiences as femmes covert might have produced more sympathetic responses to the plight of slaves and sharper critiques of slave-owning society than accounts authored by men. Like enslaved men and women, free married women faced violence with little or no legal recourse. They too experienced denials of independence, mobility, property ownership, control of children, access to higher education, occupational choice, and suffrage, although differing in degrees of magnitude, consequence, or...

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1 References are to the most recent, revised edition of the diary: Philip Wright, ed., Lady Nugent’s Journal of her Residence in Jamaica from 1801 to 1805 (Kingston, Jam., 1966). Earlier editions appeared in 1838, 1907, 1934, and 1939. For an excellent introduction to women’s narratives, including Nugent’s, see Bridget Brereton, “Text, Testimony and Gender: An Examination of Some Texts by Women on the English-speaking Caribbean from the 1770s to the 1920s,” in Verene Shepherd, Brereton, and Barbara Bailey, eds., Engendering History: Caribbean Women in Historical Perspective (New York, 1995), 63–93, although we do not find the same degree of tolerance and sympathy toward enslaved people in Nugent that Brereton asserts on pp. 68 and 75–76. For a sophisticated examination of Nugent’s diary, see Patricia Mohammed, “Nuancing the Feminist Discourse in the Caribbean,” Social and Economic Studies, 43, No. 3 (1994), esp. 145–66, although we find Nugent’s position to be more public and political than the private and domestic role stressed in this analysis.
character. Free women’s reactions to slave society might therefore not only reveal aspects of enslavement missed by men, but also reflect women’s visions of their own rights and liabilities.\textsuperscript{2}

The autobiography of Eliza Chadwick Roberts significantly augments our knowledge of women’s understandings of Jamaican society, given its remarkable similarities to Nugent’s journal and its equally striking divergences.\textsuperscript{3} The two women shared a number of experiences and, as important, offer many converging or complementary perspectives on both this pre-eminent sugar plantation colony in the era of slavery and women’s construction of sensibility and femininity. Their sharply divergent understandings of slavery along with subtler differences in self-confidence and independence reflect contrasting backgrounds, experiences, and beliefs and help locate the factors that inclined women to particular stances on important issues of public policy. A comparison of their two accounts discloses much about Jamaica in the early nineteenth century. It reveals even more about the affinities and differences in perception of a wealthy Englishwoman and a laboring American during a period when both abolitionism and women’s rights were emerging as major public issues.

The two women’s lives converged at several points. Both were born in northeastern New Jersey: Roberts in Shrewsbury in 1784, Nugent in Perth Amboy in 1771.\textsuperscript{4} Both married considerably older men (Roberts was nine years her husband’s junior, Nugent fourteen years younger) and were accompanying their husbands on business; Captain William Roberts was a ship’s

2 The connection between the two forms of subjugation has been made many times. The best-known instance occurred in 1840 at the World Anti-Slavery Convention and would lead to the first women’s rights convention 8 years later. See Eighty Years and More (1875–1897): Reminiscences of Elizabeth Cady Stanton (New York, 1970; orig. pub. 1898), 79–154. But these similarities had been observed well before an organized movement emerged. Esther deBerdt Reed linked militant womanhood with the fight against enslavement and barbarity in her broadside, “Sentiments of an American Woman” (Philadelphia, 1780). Ann Baker Carson separated from her husband in 1816, because she was “not the beloved friend of a man of rational mind, but rather the pampered slave of a haughty, capricious husband”; Mary Clarke, ed., The Memoirs of the Celebrated and Beautiful Mrs. Ann Carson, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1838), 93. However, as Suzanne Lebsock has pointed out, “living with slavery made it difficult for free women to grow into a feminist frame of reference,” because they “simply did not have access to that abolitionist catalyst”; The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784–1860 (New York, 1984), 240–41. This was especially true in the Caribbean; see Hilary McD. Beckles, “White Women and Slavery in the Caribbean,” History Workshop, 36 (1993), 66–82. Still, even in slave societies, one could find some “white women betraying allegiances of race and class to assert their stronger allegiance to the sisterhood of all women”; Jean Fagan Yellin, “Introduction,” to Harriet A. Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself, ed. L. Maria Child (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), xxxiii. Eliza Chadwick Roberts was able to empathize with enslaved women and seek to incorporate slaves into her religious and intellectual worlds, Maria Skinner Nugent did not. This article suggests some of the possible reasons for these contrasting reactions.

3 The manuscript of Eliza Chadwick Roberts’s autobiography is housed at the Monmouth County Historical Association, Freehold, N. J., along with a 115-page handwritten transcription. For a brief outline of Roberts’s life, see Virginia M. Lyttle et al., Ladies at the Crossroads: Eighteenth-Century Women of New Jersey (Morristown, N. J., 1978), 68–70.

4 A typescript genealogy filed with Roberts’s manuscript gives her date of birth as Mar. 27, 1784.
master engaged in trade, and Major General George Nugent was lieutenant governor of Jamaica. The differences in age and experience could have been a source of inequality in their marriages, but their writings portray companionate unions of loving, sympathetic partners.

Roberts’s and Nugent’s residences in Jamaica briefly overlapped (Roberts from June 10 to July 14, 1805; Nugent from July 29, 1801, to June 28, 1805). Both left friends, kin, and their accustomed activities to be with their husbands and to visit an exotic environment that at once enticed and repelled them. There they were in a society where the vast majority of the population was enslaved and where white skin conferred privilege. Jamaica’s unfamiliarity brought both women’s marriages to the forefront of their concerns. Their remarkably similar conceptions of wedlock, duty, and affection drew on their acquaintance with contemporary novels, plays, poetry, magazines, and histories directed toward the new market of literate women. They found a creative outlet as well as solace in writing, carefully recording the details of their Jamaican sojourns and also using their writings for personal introspection.5 Both women evinced a taste for heroic adventure, albeit one modified by a genteel feminine sensibility. They had much in common, even though they never met.

Social and economic status divided the two women. Roberts, the daughter of Thomas and Elizabeth Woolley Chadwick, was neither wealthy nor economically secure. Her father’s estate was valued at a meager £59.17.4 at his death in 1791, the remains of the life’s work of a veteran of the Battle of Monmouth, a petty tradesman, and sometime farmer, boatman, and innkeeper.6 Lacking financial resources, family members then scattered into separate households, and an uncle took in Roberts to replace his deceased children. Violence dogged her early life. Her father died after a severe beating by a gang of thieves, and the next year one of her brothers had his skull broken by the tailor to whom he was apprenticed. Her mother’s remarriage to a New York City grocer and her older siblings’ marriages or deaths allowed Roberts to move to the city and rejoin her mother. Soon after, Roberts married when just fourteen (although she misrepresented her age in her memoirs as a more respectable fifteen).7 Her twenty-three-year-old bridegroom was a mate on board a merchant ship; later in his career, he

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6 Elmer T. Hutchinson, ed., Calendar of New Jersey Wills, in New Jersey Archives, First Series: Documents Relating to the Colonial, Revolutionary and Post-Revolutionary History of the State of New Jersey, vol. 8: 1791–1795 (Trenton, 1918), 69–70.

7 Roberts reverts to her correct age throughout the rest of her autobiography.
attempted shopkeeping and failed, before returning to sea. During her husband’s many absences from their home in the city, Roberts worked in her mother’s and stepfather’s grocery store, helped with their boarders, or supported herself as a milliner.

Like many Americans in the early republic, Roberts left behind a childhood of rural poverty to try her luck in town. Her family was on the move, from rural property ownership to rural tenancy and then to petty proprietorships and rented quarters in the city of New York. Her fortunes there waxed and waned with the frequent epidemics of yellow fever and other diseases and with the economic disruptions of the Napoleonic Wars. By her own account, she was relatively prosperous and could even afford a servant when family members were healthy and her husband was working. But when she or the children fell sick and her husband was absent, she returned to work and sometimes verged on poverty. Her mother and married sisters provided the emergency aid that kept her from total destitution during frequent bouts of ill-health and no income—this strong female network complemented her husband’s sporadic economic contributions. Roberts envisioned no clear trajectory toward higher status; she measured success simply by survival from disease and economic disaster. She, like many workers, preferred the independence of petty proprietorships and aspired to some of the comforts of the consumer revolution, yet her ambitions centered less on the circumstances of her immediate family than on broader social reforms that might improve the lot of all disadvantaged people.8 The guiding principles of “this inlifhtend age,” she thought, should be “liberty and philanthropy.”9 In the economic turmoil of the early Industrial Revolution, income, occupation, and status were all insecure. Altruism provided some cushion.

Nugent came from a wealthy and politically prominent family. Her father was Cortlandt Skinner, a prosperous lawyer and leading loyalist during the American Revolution; her mother, Elizabeth Kearney, was the daughter of another well-to-do New Jersey lawyer.10 Nugent married well. Her husband, a major general when posted to Jamaica, had inherited a £200,000 estate and owned substantial property in England and Ireland. Nugent began life as the daughter of affluent colonial commoners, then entered genteel British society, was the governor’s wife in Jamaica, and shortly thereafter became Lady Nugent. Unlike Roberts, she was driven by personal ambition and sought further advances into the aristocracy as her and her family’s fortunes rose with the British empire’s expansion.

Roberts, whose autobiography is one of the first by an American working woman, was largely self-educated. She never attended school and never mastered spelling, punctuation, or certain common grammatical rules, but

9 Roberts manuscript, 67.
noted early in her memoirs that “Ever since I can Remember I Could Read correct and with a peace of Chalk print my thoughts upon a board,” probably with the help of her mother. Literacy, she felt, was only partial compensation for being “deprived of the many advantages of Life and education.”  

Nugent, on the other hand, was highly educated, widely read, and cosmopolitan.

Both women were raised as Anglicans. In the eighteenth century, the Church of England had little interest in challenging the status quo, even though it encompassed slavery. Anglican leaders were “catechists and liturgists, not field generals warring against society,” while in the United States, the church was increasingly the bastion of the mercantile elite and disdainful of the lower orders. Roberts converted to Methodism just before going to Jamaica, briefly following the eccentric and charismatic evangelist Lorenzo Dow, the “apostle of love,” before returning to mainstream Methodism and its doctrines of spiritual perfectibility and universal salvation. In the early nineteenth century, Methodism was an inclusive faith attracting artisans, shopkeepers, laborers, and the poor. Roberts apparently began writing as an outgrowth of her religious conversion, first composing hymns and religious poetry, then shifting to secular introspection and descriptive personal accounts. Nugent followed the religious examples of her youth and remained a staunch believer in High Church Anglicanism. She carefully catechized her dependents, instructing them in the ceremonies of the faith and preaching acceptance of the inequities of this world in hopes of salvation in the next.

Roberts and Nugent differed politically, in part because of their family histories, in part because of their own experiences. Roberts’s father fought on the American side in the Battle of Monmouth (1778), during which British troops torched his farm. Her mother and older siblings had to flee “from a state of affluence,” leaving them “without a shelter or the Common necessities of Life.” Thomas Chadwick later joined the Associators of Retaliation, who vowed to wage war against civilian loyalists in revenge for similar attacks. The family struggled after the war, but their economic and personal losses confirmed a patriotism bolstered by familial stories of British violence and American heroism. Roberts embraced the Revolutionary goals of freedom, liberty, and independence. British embargoes, impressment, and depredations on trade during the early republic confirmed her allegiances


13 Wilentz, Chants Democratic, 81, 80.

14 Roberts manuscript, 7.

while perpetuating her family’s lack of property as her husband lost cargoes and was briefly imprisoned during the Napoleonic Wars.

Nugent’s father, on the other hand, raised six loyalist battalions in northern New Jersey early in the Revolution. (It may well have been his troops who destroyed the Chadwick farm.) Nugent and her mother soon fled the state in well-founded fear of Thomas Chadwick and the Associators, spending much of the war in exile in New York City and then England. Nugent ardently embraced Tory principles, established religion, and aristocratic privilege. She firmly believed that order, tradition, ceremony, and deference would prevent further violence from popular uprisings.

Roberts’s patriotism had a gendered component absent from Nugent’s writings. At the beginning of her memoirs she artfully counterposed the enthusiastic celebrations of the Treaty of Paris with the cool reception of her birth. In early 1784, when news of the treaty reached New Jersey, “Liberty att length Reared its standard on the shores of the western world and froadom, dear bought froadom, sat triumphant on the dark forests of america . . . when pease was again Restored to America I may date the period of My birth.” While her father organized bonfires in celebration of this national era of promise, her arrival met with his regret. He was “disapointed as to my sex,” since girls could not be patriots. She recalled that her father “oftimes wished me a boy to partake of the spirit of the times by hearing those Events of times [past] Repeated. My mind dwelt upon them, Infant plays became Irksome to me and . . . I would Retire to some Sequestred spot and Reflect on the Evils of Life.” She ascribed her recurrent bouts of melancholy both to her father’s rejection of her as a girl, the third daughter of four children, and to her civic exclusion as a female. Yet the act of writing her autobiography provided an antidote to these marginal beginnings. She became the heroine of her narrative, surmounting one hardship after another. And when she recorded the family tales of the Battle of Monmouth, she balanced her father’s heroism with her mother’s equally courageous role. Women could indeed partake in the spirit of the times.16

Roberts understood the liabilities faced by women, single and married, even while she extolled the virtues of companionate marriage. Her mother’s two husbands had died intestate, and both times the widow, “defrauded of her Rights,” lost all her property to unscrupulous men. At several points during her mother’s second marriage, her husband insisted on changing residences, “much against her [mother’s] own will.” These unilateral decisions by her stepfather would lead to disaster, just as a similar submission impoverished Roberts during her second marriage. Female networks were important counterparts to marriage. Roberts relied on her mother and sisters and supported a close friend who left her husband after having “suffered much from [his] indescretions.” When Roberts’s second husband lay dying and she was far from her family, she found the “female friend I needed.” Mrs. Parry, a Quaker, was “meek and amiable—the child of Sensibility” and, as Roberts was proud to set off in bold strokes, “—she was a public speaker—.” But

16 Roberts manuscript, 12, 13.
female support could not compensate for a husband’s monetary contribution. Roberts was well aware of men’s superior earning power, and she was ambivalent about her place in this unequal economy. In her second widowhood, she both lamented “this unprotected state with my little fatherless infants” and proudly announced, in reference to her brothers-in-law, that “never in all my distress had I sought Relief from the hand of man.” Her “feelings Revolted at the Idea of being dependant on the bounty of any,” certainly not from men who were not loving husbands. She welcomed the economic support of her husbands, but otherwise preferred to depend on her own “fortitude” or the aid of female friends and family. Nugent never contemplated supporting herself, because she could depend on her husband’s wealth. She accepted her dependence without comment. The women’s family histories, their religious choices, their confidence in their abilities, and their understandings of privilege or deprivation as citizens and as women shaped their politics and their reactions to Jamaica.

Roberts’s 5,000-word account of her month on the island lacks the scope and detail of Nugent’s 100,000-word journal describing her four-year stay. The documents also represent different literary genres. Nugent wrote daily entries in a diary devoted to her Jamaican sojourn, whereas Roberts described her short visit there as one episode, albeit a defining one, of her life story. Nugent recounted the day’s events every evening, and her diary conveys the immediacy of her observations. Roberts did not begin her memoir until 1814, nine years after her trip to Jamaica and a year after Captain Roberts died. She continued her chronicle through 1821, but internal evidence indicates that she penned the Jamaica material before remarrying in 1816. Roberts presents a more considered and polished account, despite its vernacular style, than Nugent’s episodic, daily notations. Moreover, the unusually vivid detail of this segment of Roberts’s memoir suggests that she may have referred to contemporary notes or to a diary that has not survived; she mentions elsewhere that she took time to write every day.

Neither woman expected her writings to be entirely private. Nugent wanted her children to read her diary when they were older, while Roberts addressed her autobiography to an unnamed friend and seems to have intended a broader audience. Despite differences in format, the two writers shared an outlook on the cultivation of feeling, the developing cult of domesticity, and the ideal of the companionate, egalitarian, and loving marriage. Both used their notebooks as places to perfect and refine these ideals, testing and reshaping performance in the creative act of writing. Jamaica provided an exotic background against which both women could depict themselves as heroines.

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17 Ibid., 24, 37, 32, 41, 110, 112, 85.
18 Ibid., 44; for more on her writing habits see ibid., 55, 87.
Roberts’s and Nugent’s views were honed by the culture of sensibility, but their sensibilities were equally influenced by their backgrounds, beliefs, and personal histories. Recent scholarship on the development of a culture of sensibility has largely been confined to middle-class readers. Rachel M. Brownstein’s assertion that “the realistic novel rose in England alongside the newly leisureed wives and daughters of the new middle class, who were . . . making themselves into ladies” captures aspects of Nugent’s life as she moved from the colonial gentry into the English aristocracy.20 Such sensibilities do not, however, illuminate the different trajectory of Roberts’s harder life. Her history does not fit the middle-class model, and her understanding of Jamaica draws on her laboring background and beliefs. Juxtaposing Roberts’s and Nugent’s presentations of contemporary ideas and ideals clarifies and complicates our understanding of women as readers, writers, and shapers of opinion. Their views provide an unusual opportunity to examine the emerging social and economic divisions of the early nineteenth century from a woman-centered perspective. Starting with religious activities and literary societies in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and moving on to a host of reform organizations by the 1830s and 1840s, free women were increasingly involved in questions of public policy. Whether they gravitated to liberalism or conservatism, antislavery or proslavery politics, advocacy of women’s rights or traditional gender roles, or other emerging issues depended on their perceptions of the world around them as shaped by their circumstances. The writings of Eliza Roberts and Maria Nugent help to locate crucial divisions in women’s experience that would incline them toward one public policy position or another, particularly in relation to the institution of slavery.21


21 Most studies of status, class, or social definition in this period are decidedly masculinist, admittedly because women’s voices and experiences are elusive. See, for example, Stuart M. Blumin, The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760–1900 (New York, 1989); Ronald Schultz, The Republic of Labor: Philadelphia Artisans and the Politics of Class, 1720–1830 (New York, 1993); and Richard L. Bushman, The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities (New York, 1992).
Roberts was explicit about her purposes in writing. Authorship provided opportunities to exercise the emotions that her workaday life lacked. She wrote to enjoy “those exstatic feelings known only to the children of Reflection and sensibility. I would not be deprived of the enjoyment of Solitude and reflection tho they are stolen from the hurry and bastle of life.” Sensibility cultivated an interior life of finer feelings—love, empathy, sympathy, pity, and sorrow—as expressed in marriage, in new experiences, in adventure, and in crisis and transcribed in the florid language of the early popular novel. She exclaimed, “how much to be prized is a Calm Retreat, far from the tumult of the busy Crowd, where Man prays on his fellow man—where deceit and fraud prevail where Candor is almoast—unmoast—unknown and a real friend is Rarely to be found.”

Virtue was to be found in privacy, away from the corruptions of business, but her home was her workshop, and her best friend, her husband, was often absent.

Nugent did not explicitly cite the cultivation of sensibility as an organizing principle of her diary, although she penned a parable whose message derived from the negative example of Mrs. Colville, whose husband captained the frigate that took the Nugents to Jamaica. “Mrs. Colville accompanied us on board,” Nugent recalled, “and I felt for her in parting with her husband; but they seemed to me to take leave with more good breeding and politeness than affection; so my commiseration was quite thrown away.”

The old-fashioned stiffness of Mrs. Colville and her concern with outward formalities contrasted with the idealized view of a sincere, candid, loving, sympathetic partnership that both Roberts and Nugent promoted in their writings, in their marriages, and in other relationships.

Roberts’s marriage was a love match. Her husband was “amiable” and filled with “sympathy and tenderness.” They had planned a life together, but he was often gone when she needed him. “I cannot describe my feelings,” she wrote when he embarked on another voyage, leaving her pregnant and her mother sick. And when her daughter died at birth, shortly after her older daughter’s death from croup, Roberts sank “into a state of insensibility . . . untill the Return of my husband.” She had a loving marriage, but it did not meet the ideal of mutual support, since she and her husband were more often apart than together. With small children, being head of her own household was at best taxing and at worst, when she or her relatives were ailing and her husband’s return was delayed by war, threatened financial ruin.

Every seaman, she wrote, leaves behind “a disconsolate wife who

22 Roberts manuscript, 3, 53.
24 Compare this contemporary poem by Hannah Griffitts: “Where is that noble Liberty of Mind, / The undisguis’d Sincerity of Heart? / Which by no false Formalities confin’d / Are far above, the low designs of Art” (ll. 9–12), in Catherine La Courreye Blecki and Karin A. Wulf, eds., Milcah Martha Moore’s Book: A Commonplace Book from Revolutionary America (University Park, Pa., 1997), 266–67.
25 Roberts manuscript, 29–30, 41, 45.
26 By the end of her voyage to Jamaica, Roberts was 3 months pregnant. Her son, Alfred, was born on Feb. 15, 1806. Family responsibilities prevented her from undertaking any further voyages; her husband drowned in 1813.
would lose her only supoprt and that of her little ones in the loss of him.”

Nugent left no account of her courtship, but it too was a love match. She peppered her diary with references to “My dearest N.” and “My dear N” and fondly remembered their wedding anniversaries. On November 15, 1802, she wrote: “This day five years I was married, and I can say sincerely from my heart, that I have never one moment repented it, nor have I ever experienced the smallest degree of slight or unkindness from my dear husband; and this year finds me a happier woman than ever.” Yet she too endured lengthy separations from her husband as the business of politics kept encroaching on her home life. Nugent’s journal exhibits a constant tug between the new ideals of female domesticity and the traditional demands of aristocratic duty. Her public role as the wife of a politically important man dominated her daily life. His position required her to uproot herself, demanded frequent and sometimes extended separations from her children or her husband, dictated elaborate rounds of socializing to cement coalitions crucial to her husband’s political success, and limited what she could do or say. Late in her second pregnancy she did forge a private sphere by, among other things, “affect[ing] to lie back in the carriage, like an invalid.” But even this temporary confinement was “politically adopted.” It served as a delaying tactic during a period of factional conflict on the island, “so all will be settled [by the time of the birth], and I shall know by that time what ladies to receive.” This brief assumption of a private, domestic role was motivated more by the demands of her husband’s office than by her wishes for an affective motherhood.

Often, however, Nugent did long for a more private existence as a devoted wife and doting mother in her own home—a place where her roles would be primary. She found compensation by occasionally retiring from the rounds of social obligation to hold “my dear healthy child, and make myself happy,” and by seeing “my dear N. so well.” A fully domestic role and the relative equality in marriage that domesticity promised eluded Nugent. She acquiesced to her secondary, supporting role, except in her diary, where her thoughts and actions predominated and where she could create the emotional trappings of sentimental domesticity.

Both women expressed considerable misgivings about going to Jamaica. A sense of duty motivated Roberts’s decision to embark for Jamaica, reinforcing her determination not to face again, as she had during his previous voyage, the fear that her husband had perished at sea. She was cementing her marriage by sharing her husband’s life, becoming one of a number of women who took to the sea in the nineteenth century, feminizing this hitherto masculine sphere. Outward bound, Roberts fulfilled her pledge to share “any dainger,” by standing at her husband’s side when their ship was attacked by

27 Roberts manuscript, 17.
28 Wright, ed., Lady Nugent’s Journal, 129.
29 Ibid., 136, 172, 171.
30 Ibid., 146.
pirates. In Nugent’s case, she had just returned with her husband to “dear England” after service in Ireland when she received word of his Jamaican posting. She observed that “we were neither of us over well pleased” at this news, “but, like good soldiers, we made up our minds to obey.” Nugent discussed her spousal obligations in the context of duty and sacrifice. “Our little home at Hampstead was so nice. . . . I should greatly have preferred remaining, instead of playing the Governor’s lady to the blackies.” Both women accepted their subordination as long as it was tempered by affection.

Just as Roberts and Nugent shared attitudes about their duties as loving and beloved wives, so too they emphasized their emotional distress on leaving home and family. In poignantly describing “the painful task of taking leave of our dear friends” and especially “my poor dear mother,” Nugent anticipated Roberts’s lament that “my mind felt oppressed when I bid my friends farwell, in particular my mother.” Neither Roberts nor Nugent indicated that their husbands were similarly affected. But their husbands’ intercession to placate and comfort the grieving women confirms one interpretation of such sentiments as educational, since they brought men into women’s sphere. Thus “the intreatyes of my husband” countered Roberts’s “pensive Sadness” during the voyage, whereas a melancholy Nugent was “soon cheered” by her “devoted husband and best of friends.”

In loving marriages, affectionate husbands recognized, sympathized with, and ameliorated the sacrifices of their wives. Despite anxieties about leaving the familiar and traveling to the unknown, the lengthy ocean voyages (Roberts’s lasted twenty-two days, Nugent’s thirty-five) provided a romantic interlude in otherwise hectic lives. In virtually interchangeable passages, Roberts sat “under an auning on the [deck] of the vessel, my husband Seated by me, my head Reclining on his Shoulder, vewing the beautefulness of the sun which Reflected on the agitated bosum of the ocien,” while Nugent “S[a]t on deck all the day, and amuse[d] myself very well, talking to General N[ugent] about the future, and really enjoying the beautiful scene around us.” The romance of travel heightened their marital romances.


33 Ibid., 2: 5; Roberts manuscript, 57; Barker-Benfield, Culture of Sensibility, esp. 231–58.
34 Wright, ed., Lady Nugent’s Journal, 3; Roberts manuscript, 61.
But an overly sentimental view of marriage might be considered simply self-indulgent. Both women attached higher, and especially religious, purposes to their refined sensibilities. The spiritual comfort Roberts and Nugent sought on board ship contrasts starkly with their husbands’ attitudes, as do their somber reflections on their homelands. Roberts assuaged her fear that “this was perhaps the Last time I was Ever to behold the place of my nativity” by “Commending my Self to the protecting arm of deity,” while Nugent prayed “God grant us all a safe return to our native land.” Their religiosity did, however, assume different forms at sea. Roberts celebrated divine creation while abasing herself before the vastness of the natural world in an awe-filled passage describing the ocean and marveling at aquatic wildlife. Her reflections have a thoroughly modern tone in their praise of human ability, endeavor, and technological accomplishment and in their affirmation of Enlightenment philosophical and scientific ideas. God gave man “a Capicious [capacious] mind, that threw different ages knoledge has increased. and there is not a Science but what is become easy to man.” Nugent did not show any of Roberts’s curiosity, reverence, or wonder. Her spirituality and beliefs instead found expression in ministry. Before setting sail, she “bought forty-five Bibles, and as many Prayer Books, for the poor sailors,” and on board she led worship services.35 Marriage might have confined the women to subordinate roles, but religious sentiment, love, and duty could also expand their spheres of influence.

Much of Roberts’s record of her outward-bound journey related events and observations common to the genre of travel accounts. Her extended meditation on the violence and bloodshed of the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), however, disclosed an unusually detailed knowledge of its circumstances, information that may have come from refugees and the gossip circulating in the seafaring community or from the “publick prints” that she regularly read. At the same time she displayed an uncommon humanitarian sympathy for St. Domingue’s slaves in her exceptionally evenhanded analysis of these events.36

When her ship, the Independence, docked at the port of Annotto Bay in St. Mary Parish, Jamaica, on Monday, June 10, 1805, Roberts, like Nugent before her, entered a markedly different society from any she had previously known. Jamaica was by then the world’s leading sugar producer and Britain’s richest colony, the brightest jewel in her imperial crown. Sugar’s profitability rested on a plantation system and the labor of hundreds of thousands of

35 Wright, ed., Lady Nugent’s Journal, 3, 5; Roberts manuscript, 57, 59. While Nugent was buying Bibles, her husband was also doing some last minute shopping, but it was not for the benefit of the “poor sailors” that he “laid in a stock of wines for the voyage, those on board being very so” (5).

36 Roberts manuscript, 56–57, 61, 79. Compare seaman James R. Durand, who in 1802 stated that it was “a proper purpose, to get white people out of the reach of these horrid murderous blacks,” in The Life and Adventures of James R. Durand: . . . (Sandwich, Mass., 1995; orig. pub. 1817), 12. Black deaths were rarely considered. A few abolitionists found justification for the slaughter of whites, but even they ignored black deaths, which makes Roberts’s empathy for enslaved Haitians the more remarkable. See Winthrop D. Jordan, White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812 (Chapel Hill, 1968), 375–91.
African slaves and their Jamaican-born descendants. By 1805, slaves made up more than three quarters of the island’s nearly 400,000 inhabitants, but the brutal conditions of slavery caused population decline, requiring the constant importation of Africans to maintain and increase the enslaved workforce on which profits depended. The white society in which both Nugent and Roberts found themselves was numerically small and predominantly male—this population of 20,000 had at least 50 percent more men than women.37

Jamaica’s dominant white class was determined to maintain its supremacy in a society where it constituted a tiny minority and in an economy based on its exploitation of the black majority’s unfree labor. Haiti’s successful slave revolt indicated the precariousness of such control and allowed Roberts and Nugent, whose residences in Jamaica coincided with the revolution and its aftermath, to record white Jamaicans’ responses to this manifestation of their worst fears. Both women were also well placed to observe the decades-long imperial struggle for control between Britain and France draw to a close.

Annotto Bay, through which much of St. Mary’s sugar and rum went overseas, usually bustled with British and North American shipping. Just a few days before Roberts’s arrival, however, the threat of a French naval attack caused Nugent’s husband to declare martial law. Roberts’s observation that “the people of Jemaca was much disturbed” by fears of French invasion, finds confirmation in Nugent’s journal. While General Nugent toiled to make “the best arrangements possible, for the defence of the island,” his wife’s worries multiplied. Her nights were “anxious and sleepless,” and her days “passed most miserably . . . looking continually towards the sea for the enemy.”38

Roberts, newly arrived on the island, witnessed events along the north coast. Martial law prevailed and “a general Confusion apeared among the inhabetants.” Because “an imbargo was Laid on all vessels,” Roberts, her husband, and crew were “obliged to submit to the inconveniences imposaed on us of being detaind against our will.” She conjectured that because “the north Side of the Island, was but indifferently fortefied,” the embargo was “to prevent any information being giving to the french.” Apparently untroubled by the French threat, Roberts and her husband embarked on a tour of Jamaica that included a stay on the Newry sugar estate, a short distance southwest of Annotto Bay. During her travels, she observed Jamaica’s war preparedness. She also learned of the desperate measures ordered by General Nugent if the French attacked: all the ships were to “Cut there yards [masts] and Sett fire to there Ships Rather then have them fall into the hands of the french.” Although aware of the local population’s anxiety at these events, Roberts does not seem to have let the crisis trouble her in the least. In fact,

37 B. W. Higman, *Slave Population and Economy in Jamaica, 1807–1834* (Cambridge, 1976), 142–44, 255; estimates that 308,755 slaves lived in Jamaica in 1805, 25,988 of whom were in St. Mary’s Parish, where Roberts spent most of her time. The island’s free black and free colored population stood at perhaps twice that of the white population.

she mocked the fears of white Jamaicans, sarcastically describing their transformation into “heroes, or who is a fraid of the french” once the British fleet arrived. She was, however, recalling events from the safety of New York City years after the episode, and she did note at the end of her stay how she longed to be “in my own peacefull dwelling,” perhaps recollecting tensions experienced in Jamaica.39 Nugent wrote in the heat of the moment, and her fears are transparent.

Roberts found the island beautiful and exotic, and the people she met were “kind and polite to Strangers, and I had every attention Shewn me,” undoubtedly one of the benefits of whiteness in a slave society. Poor road conditions, as well as the arduousness of travel by horseback, confined the couple to the north coast, but they still covered a considerable distance, passing from St. Mary, through the parish of St. Ann, en route to Martha Brae in Trelawny Parish. Roberts retraced part of the route Nugent had taken when she toured the island three years earlier. Traveling west along the coast from Annotto Bay, Nugent too marveled at the scenery and agreed that the roads were “frightful!” Like Roberts, she had warm, albeit sardonic, praise for the hospitality she received: “It is wonderful the attention that is paid me, and the care that is taken of me; all I say and do is perfection, for I am the only woman!”40

Sugar production captured Roberts’s attention as the guest of “mr hazard,” the manager, or perhaps overseer at Newry estate, while Nugent had closely observed the process on a visit to William “King” Mitchell’s New Hall estate near Spanish Town. Both accounts have telling similarities. Thus Roberts’s declaration that “the Sugar works are extensive and affords much amusement and inquiry to a Stranger” echoed Nugent’s assertion that “sugar-making . . . is indeed very curious and entertaining.” Both women were drawn to the same gruesome details of the industrial hazards faced by slave workers who, Nugent recounted, sometimes “get their poor fingers into the mill; and . . . a hatchet . . . was always ready to sever the whole limb, as the only means of saving the poor sufferer’s life.” Roberts gave an equally vivid and dramatic rendition: “for fear that the hand Should bee Cau[gh]t in the Rolers . . . and the whole body in a minute would bee drawn into the mill an over Seear [overseer] Stands with a hatchet or Saber Ready to Swerve [sever] the Limb.”41 It appears that both had guides who knew how to grab the attention of tourists.

While both women expressed solicitude for the danger to workers, Roberts did not consider the labor demands on those who “Constantly tended [the boilers] . . . night and day” particularly onerous; it was “the same as keeping differant watches att Sea.” Since she herself would “sett the whole night Rather than disoblige my [millinery] customers,” she was not appalled at plantation work schedules. Hard work and long hours were the norm in her world. Moreover, she easily picked up the logic of production, extrapolating from what she had observed to what she did not see: “the fires

39 Roberts manuscript, 63–64, 69.
40 Ibid., 63, 64–69; Wright, ed., Lady Nugent’s Journal, 77–83, 63.
41 Wright, ed., Lady Nugent’s Journal, 63–63; Roberts manuscript, 69, 64, 65. In 1805, John Ellis, a member of a prominent planter family that included Charles Rose Ellis (later Lord Seaford), owned Newry estate. Hazzard does not appear in contemporary records.
[of the distilleries] I did not observe," she wrote, “but Sepose them to bee Simmeler to those of the Sugar houses." Nugent, on the other hand, when told of the labor regimen, declared “how dreadful to think of their standing twelve hours over a boiling cauldron, and doing the same thing.” Likewise, the sights, smells, and circumstances accompanying the frenetically paced production schedule overwhelmed Nugent. She “could not comprehend” the complex distilling process and complained that the smell of the cane juice dregs “made [her] so sick” she had to leave the distillery: “I would not have a sugar estate for the world!” she averred. In betraying no such qualms, Roberts highlighted a difference between the two women that emerges elsewhere in their writings. Nugent displayed a more acute delicacy than Roberts, which may have been a genteel squamishness bred by her elite social status and more sheltered existence. She would also have been unfamiliar with the arduous and often squalid circumstances laboring people endured, whereas Roberts, who had worked since early childhood and supported herself and her children in her husband’s absences, knew well the sights, smells, and work conditions of an industrializing age. The distillery, she said, was “Like I have observed in tan yards.”

Nevertheless, the two travelogues have much in common; their authors marveled at new experiences and vistas—typical first impressions of touring visitors imbued with romanticized aesthetics. Both women undertook their trips shortly after arriving in Jamaica, but whereas Roberts never shed her newcomer’s enthusiasm during her brief stay, these eventually wore off for Nugent, who became increasingly tired of island life during her four-year sojourn. “The pleasant Situation” Roberts enjoyed in 1805, therefore, more resembles Nugent’s mood in 1802, when, as a relatively recent arrival, she delighted in “romantic, beautiful and picturesque” scenes and shared “great glee” with her companions, than it does her despondency three years later. “How different I feel from what I did on my first arrival,” she wrote, since “not sparing myself the first year or two, as well as the constant anxiety of late, have done as much as the climate, in wearing me out.” As Nugent was penning these bleak emotions, Roberts and her husband were just a few miles north, blithely heading off on horseback together to “vew the different parts of the Island.”

The two women also met with similar accidents that introduced unexpected adventure to their travels. Roberts was en route to Annotto Bay from Newry when she attempted to ford the rain-swollen Wag Water River. “Having Repeatedly passd that way I was not aware of any danger and amediately attempted to Cross,” she recalled, but her horse was soon overwhelmed by the current. Her husband watched from the shore and Hazzard lost hope, but “firm to the Saddle,” she “guided the foaming anemil,” refusing to “give up to fear.” After she was “out of danger” she found herself “quite overcome with fright and exertions,” and had to be carried to a nearby house, “where [her] wet Cloths was taken off[?] and [she] took some Cordle [cordial] to Revive.” Then she employed “a number of negroes” to help her cross to the opposite shore.

42 Roberts manuscript, 65, 86; Wright, ed., Lady Nugent’s Journal, 62–63.
43 Wright, ed., Lady Nugent’s Journal, 61, 63, 241; Roberts manuscript, 64.
44 Roberts manuscript, 70–71.
Nugent too was fording a river in spate when the horses drawing her carriage got into difficulty. She clasped her baby and called for help. A male companion dashed into the rushing Rio Magno and retrieved the infant. She waited in the carriage until he returned to rescue her, “a sad weight” in her own words. Back on the riverbank, she washed herself with rum and drank some, while waiting for the flood to recede. Then Nugent and the rest of her party crossed the river, similarly using “negroes as guides and supports,” whereupon she, like Roberts, was overcome by her emotions. “My spirits forsook me, and I fainted,” she recalled, and only after a “shower of tears” could she continue her journey.45

Both Roberts and Nugent related their heroic adventures in a similar fashion that reveals the influence of contemporary fictional models. For example, “Pamela,” Samuel Richardson’s best-selling fictive heroine, is injured while fleeing her enemies, an event that she later relates as the “Story of my Enterprize” to an audience “full of Wonder at my Resolution and Venturesomeness.” Yet after her exploits she requires the assistance of servants to carry her to her chamber where she promptly “faint[s] away.”46 Roberts and Nugent narrate both their own resolution and their appropriate feminine fragility, although Roberts presents a heroic self that is firmer, more knowledgeable, more competent, and less dependent on masculine strength than Nugent. Her life experiences had provided her with a more assertive script for recounting women’s adventures.

Roberts’s talent for vivid description was underpinned by a sure sense of personal politics and philosophy that drew heavily on Christianity, republicanism, the culture of sensibility, and the Enlightenment. In Jamaica, she quickly realized the incompatibility of her cherished values with what she recognized as the defining characteristic of the island’s society—the institution of slavery. Roberts grew up in an era of quickening abolitionist activity, which witnessed the first challenges to slavery—the Haitian Revolution and the gradual abolition of slavery in the northern United States (belatedly achieved in her native New Jersey in 1804, somewhat sooner in New York in 1799). Roberts must certainly have had contact with enslaved Africans and African Americans, but she would never have experienced life in a society defined by slavery.47 She found her new circumstances remarkable; her discussion of slavery and its effects on the enslaved and the enslavers is one of the longest sections of her travel account and the most reflective and ideological.

46 Samuel Richardson, Pamela, or, Virtue Rewarded (1740), ed. T. C. Duncan Eaves and Ben D. Kimpel (Boston, 1971), 156. Claire Jaquier notices the erotic overtones of the prostration and heavy breathing in these fearful heroines. See “Farouches vertues: peur et désir chez quelques heroines de roman au XVIIIe Siècle,” in Jacques Berchtold and Michel Porret, eds., La Peur au XVIIIe Siècle: Discours, représentations, pratiques (Genève, 1994), esp. 142–44.
Roberts’s politics, sentimental imagery, and philosophy permeated her thorough critique of slavery. In exclaiming “oh freedom, how art thou to be prized,” she integrated Enlightenment ideas with her country’s republican ideology. Her grasp of contemporary politics enabled her to draw an astute parallel between Jamaican slaveowners and the actions of the Barbary pirates: “is this a Country,” she asked, “boasted as an enlightened people, which would Rail with bitterness att the Barbarian of the desart, or the Cruilty algeareen Slavery, when each day witneses a Cruilty as great in them Selves.” Roberts’s humanitarianism and Christianity found expression in her “pitty for this unfortunate Race,” who were not separate or inferior people, but “thousands of fellow beings groaning under the lash.” The brutality of slavery horrified Roberts, as she catalogued the gruesome atrocities against slaves: “Branded with hot irons . . . and for every offence whipt on there naked bodyes.” She was astonished that a plantation’s “mules and jack asses . . . is estemated equil with the poor affrecon.” In particular, she identified with the plight of enslaved women: “the wretched mother with her infant lashd to her back” was unable to attend to its cries of distress. Roberts, who had recently lost both her daughters despite intensive nursing, despaired this enforced neglect.

Nugent provided no such critique of slavery. She neither subjected the concept of chattel slavery to rigorous intellectual analysis nor placed it within contemporary political or philosophical contexts; her observations on slaves and slavery were primarily descriptive. Nugent dismissed reports “of the ill treatment of slaves . . . [as] very greatly exaggerated.” She conceded occasional abuses of power but believed that “the slaves are extremely well used.” Neither her religion nor her politics would have prompted critiques of the institution. Nugent’s belief in a hierarchical social order where some enjoyed the liberty, power, and position denied others blinded her to any connection between her personal rights and freedoms and the subjugation of Jamaica’s black population. The empathy and sensibility she cultivated so carefully in her private life had no place in her social perceptions.

Nugent’s description of enslaved women on sugar plantations illustrates her benign view of slavery, an interesting comparison to the wretched mothers Roberts saw. “Women with child work in the fields till the last six weeks, and are at work there again in a fortnight after their confinement,” Nugent observed, expressing astonishment at “how fast these black women bred, what healthy children they had, and how soon they recovered after lying-in.” She did not, however, reconcile these observations with the reality of slave population decline, despite earlier having discussed the matter with a Jamaican planter who told her “he gave two dollars to every woman who

48 Roberts manuscript, 67–68. After the U. S. declared Independence, its merchant fleet became prey to pirates from North Africa. These so-called Barbary pirates demanded tribute for vessels and cargo seized as well as ransom for crewmen detained. By 1805, American warships patrolled the Barbary coast, but naval and diplomatic measures did not eliminate piracy until 1816. For a fascinating discussion of the public reception of these captivity narratives, see Paul Baepler, ed., White Slaves, African Masters: An Anthology of American Barbary Captivity Narratives (Chicago, 1999), 1–58.

49 Wright, ed., Lady Nugent’s Journal, 86.
produced a healthy child”—a common, albeit unsuccessful planter strategy to encourage higher birth rates.⁵⁰

While in Jamaica, Nugent bore two children. A devoted mother, she breast-fed her babies over the opposition of her husband and her doctor and closely supervised them through infancy and childhood, delighting in their company and pining when apart. She did not, however, recognize a shared maternal realm with slave women: her casual remark that “the smallest [slave] children are employed in the field, ... for which purpose they are taken from their mothers at a very early age” conveys no sympathy for a disruption that would have devastated Nugent had she experienced it. Yet she could sympathize with a conch when the “poor little fish” was routed from its shell.⁵¹

Roberts considered slaves “Rati[oneal beings and have a Soul to bee Saved,” while Nugent acknowledged “that the blacks are human beings,” despite her references to cannibalism and savagery, agreeing with Roberts that slaves should be taught Christian doctrine. Indeed, Nugent immediately undertook these responsibilities in her own household. Within days of her arrival, she was discussing the religious instruction of her “black domestics” with the local rector, and two months later twenty-five of them were christened at an elaborate ceremony in the governor’s chapel. Nugent continued to arrange christenings, hear catechisms, and teach “the new blackies their prayers.” On the eve of her departure, she “assembled all the servants in the chapel, and, after prayers, spoke to them on the subject of their future conduct every Christmas. I gave them each a catechism, with a certificate of their baptism.” In instructing her domestic bondpeople, she apparently chose not to teach reading or writing, those skills that gave her such personal pleasure and solace. The gift of a catechism to presumably illiterate people acted then as a talisman of law and authority rather than an opportunity for the slaves to develop their own understanding of the gospel. People whom Roberts considered rational, Nugent saw only as childish beings who indeed “have souls” but “no reflection” and so needed her guidance.⁵²

Roberts juxtaposed her bitter condemnation of slavery’s inhumanity to a sympathetic discussion of the slave community and the life enslaved women and men created for themselves, aspects of which also engaged Nugent. “Each plantation has a Small negro town,” Roberts noted, and elderly slaves, no longer fit for field work, “take Care of the huts.” The aged also minded the small children and tended the kitchen gardens, poultry, and small livestock. She also described the provision ground system then prevalent in Jamaica, where slaves grew most of the food they consumed, supplementing the meager protein ration the plantations provided. Her observations highlighted the profitable independent economies created by enslaved people,

⁵⁰ Roberts manuscript, 67; Wright, ed., Lady Nugent’s Journal, 69, 26.
⁵¹ Wright, ed., Lady Nugent’s Journal, 208, 69, 68.
⁵² Nugent’s interest in catechizing and baptizing slaves drew on a century-old Anglican policy. The church’s Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, from its foundation in 1701, considered the conversion of slaves as central to its mission. Roberts shared this interest. Wright, ed., Lady Nugent’s Journal, 220, 98, 17, 38, 45, 103, 215, 243, 226; Roberts manuscript, 67.
which supplied most of the island’s produce and drew purchasers to the Sunday markets held throughout Jamaica not just from ships’ chandlers, as Roberts thought, but from all classes of island residents. Although the slaves’ labor drove this commercial activity, in contrast to sugar cultivation, they not only created the wealth but also accumulated it and controlled its disposal. Nugent too noted the flourishing provision ground and marketing systems.53

Roberts discussed how enslaved Jamaicans spent their earnings. They used “the profit arising from there Small Sales,” she observed, to “deck themselves out with trinkets and other finery,” which they wore to market. On market-day, “they assemble in Large partyes in the orange and pomento groves,” playing homemade musical instruments, composing songs, and dancing. Her important insight that “this is all there Recreation” reflects again on the cruelties of slavery and also on the creative opportunity for individual expression through dress, ornamentation, and musical ability. She was impressed that “Some [participants] are So active that they will dance with burthens on there heads and not dislodge it.” Roberts eloquently conveys the texture of this weekly event—its bustle, sights, smells, and sounds—and the release of human aspiration.54

Roberts also noticed funerary rites and ceremonies that Nugent ignored. She gave a brief glimpse of the West African-based cosmologies that shaped the religion of Jamaica’s slaves. “Att there buryings,” she explained, without fully understanding either the poetic or musical traditions involved, “they will dance and Sing every one differant as itt Comes into there minds about the good qualetyes of the deceased without Rhime or meeter.” Her observation that “they Rejoice there Companion or Relative has gone home and oftimes put Candles and fruit and Sometimes money for there jurney” refers to West African beliefs that the spirit world and the world of the living were proximate and connected by regularly traveled routes.55 It also recognizes the implicit critique of slavery in the slaves’ desire to return to their African homeland.

Captivated by the color and excitement of new and exotic scenes, neither woman betrayed any awareness of the white community’s qualms about the “freedoms” exercised by slaves at these markets. They neither commented on the drunkenness, unruliness, gambling, or debauchery that white residents claimed were commonplace nor expressed any worries that slaves would use these large, unfettered assemblies to foment rebellion. For both women, markets were just markets—typically busy and hectic. Roberts never betrayed any fears about a slave revolt, whereas Nugent became desperately afraid that Jamaica’s slaves would emulate Haiti’s and rebel. Nugent’s journal


54 Roberts manuscript, 66–67. Elsewhere Roberts mentions how “the luxuriante groves of orange and pomento, att the Close of day, Casts the most fragrant oders around” (64).

55 Ibid., 67.
reveals increased hostility, fear, and distrust of slaves. After having “passed a sad night of alarms” about a French attack on April 1, 1805, she heard that in “Spanish Town, the negroes appeared to be inclined to riot.” The following day, she met “a horrid looking black man, who passed us several times, without making any bow, although I recollected him as one of the boatmen. . . . He was then very humble, but to-night he only grinned, and gave us a sort of fierce look, that struck me with a terror.” Nugent did “feel confident in [her] own servants,” explaining condescendingly that they “rejoice at the bustle, but, as they profess to hate the French, their pleasure is only that of change; for, like children, they are fond of fuss and noise.” The persistence of the French threat forced her to reassess her safety, and she debated whether to go “where most of the women and children are gone already; as the interior of the island is now considered the safest place. So it certainly is, from the French,” she speculated, “but how will they guard against the insurrection of the negroes.”

Although Roberts combined a devastating condemnation of slavery and its brutality with sensitive descriptions of the world the slaves made, she stopped short of calling for the abolition of an institution on whose productivity her husband’s livelihood partially depended. Her failure to follow the logic of her arguments to conclude the need for immediate abolition may surprise modern readers, but in 1805 even gradualist reforms were deemed radical. She concluded her analysis by condemning slaveowners for resorting to “Cruelty instead of kindness. For Surely if they would gain the Love of there Slaves there Labour would bee executed with greater Cheapfulness and ease by Loving there masters.”

She may have been a radical republican, but she was no democrat, and she seemed comfortable with a servile, but noncovered, status for blacks.

Despite the transformative impulse in her conclusion, the impotence of a sentimental critique of slavery is apparent. But was she really thinking about slavery here or, as would be consistent with the gender consciousness that permeates her writings, did she have the marital status of women in mind? Wives were subordinate to their husbands, but through love and the reforming influences of women’s delicate sensibilities, even the most unfeeling of men might be tamed. Her own experience, as reconstructed in her memoirs, pointed to the power of love in ennobling both wives and husbands, and she refused dependence unless tempered by affection. Perhaps slavery might be made moral and bearable through love, just as educated women gained new respect (but not liberty or independence) in companionate, loving marriages. This sentimentality ultimately left Roberts as blind as Nugent to the harsher realities of power, colonialism, and enslavement.

57 Roberts manuscript, 68.
58 Her older brother and sister had been in service to a master tailor who hit her brother hard enough to cave in his skull, causing his death a week later. Her failure to call for an end to slavery may also be due to a failure to appreciate fully the difference between servants and slaves. Her horror at torture and call for loving relations may also be a reflection of her own family’s experiences.
Roberts was not alone in her failure to support freedom and equality as the only moral solutions to the inhumanity of Caribbean slavery. In his memoirs, first published in 1789, Olaudah Equiano concludes his chronicle of the physical and psychological brutalities of enslavement by proposing a similar program of reform rather than abolition. He tells slaveowners that “by changing your conduct, and treating your slaves as men... they would be faithful, honest, intelligent, and vigorous; and peace, prosperity, and happiness would attend you.” It is remotely possible that Roberts had read Equiano’s autobiography, published in New York in 1791 and purchased primarily by artisans, but more likely Roberts and Equiano both felt that the enormous influence of the West Indian plantocracy made abolition politically impossible. Amelioration through awakening planter sensibilities may have seemed then the last best hope for improving the lives of the enslaved, given the economic and political realities of the sugar plantation complex.

Nugent, meanwhile, “amused [her]self with reading the Evidence before the House of Commons, on... the Abolition of the Slave Trade,” but found abolitionist arguments unpersuasive. Convinced of slavery’s benevolence, however, she felt “there would be certainly no necessity for the Slave Trade, if religion, decency and good order, were established among the negroes; if they could be prevailed upon to marry.” This eventuality would transpire “if our white men would but set [the slaves] a little better example” rather than live “in a state of licentiousness with their female slaves.” Whites should have known better than to engage in interracial sexuality and should instead encourage “matrimony among them.” She denied that enslaved peoples had any inherent sense of morality: they had to be shown the way by their owners. Blacks were ciphers to whom whites might inscribe the most convenient characteristics—and here the enslaved peoples’ economic interests in reproduction of the labor force just happened to coincide with sacramental Christianity. For Nugent then, it was stricter control and more regulation by a morally superior, self-restrained gentry that would solve any problems in the slave system, an attitude reflective of her politics and High Church beliefs. Despite advocating that slaves be christianized and given qualified recognition of their humanity, Nugent ultimately regarded enslaved peoples as Others—an alien group she encapsulated in terms like “blackies,” as a diminutive, benighted people.

Roberts, on the other hand, accepted the slaves as rational fellow beings who exhibited interesting folkways that paralleled her life and experiences—dancing, singing, working, trading, celebrating, and mourning. She empathized with mothers and children and reacted in sympathetic pain to


62 Roberts manuscript, 67.
whippings. She never called on slaves to change their ways. Rather she called on whites to seek the slaves’ love and acknowledge their humanity. Methodists sang “Blest is the man whose softening heart / Feels all another’s pain”; it was a lesson she had taken to heart.\textsuperscript{63} Whites needed to humble themselves; they needed to be reborn, and, like Roberts, transformed by the “heart religion” of Methodism. Roberts’s world expected social inequalities, but was tolerant and inclusive. Nugent’s was hierarchical, hegemonic, and exclusive.\textsuperscript{64}

The two women agreed on one issue raised by slavery, its baneful effect on the island’s white population. They offered nearly identical analyses; where Roberts found that “the white people are the most indolent I ever meet with, and the greatest epicures,” Nugent observed how “they become indolent and inactive, regardless of every thing but eating, drinking, and indulging themselves.” Both blamed the “number of servants,” who, said Nugent, “attend to any caprice” of the whites. Roberts saw the white inhabitants as infantilized by their servants. In the evenings, “the Ladyes has there mattrasses fixd with Springs Like a Swing Cradle and are Swang in this untill asleep.” Nugent saw white men “almost entirely under the dominion of their mulatto favourites,” so that they were indolent and inactive instead of independent, decisive, and masterful. If adults were like babies, white children were preternaturally domineering adults. Nugent observed her niece, like other wealthy children, become “a little tyrant.” Both women recognized the consequences of luxury and unlimited power. Unrestrained sensuality brought immorality. Roberts complained that whites “pay no Regard to the Sabbath but keep it as a day of mirth,” while Nugent criticized their “general disregard of . . . religion.”\textsuperscript{65} Self-indulgence profaned even the Sabbath.

Roberts, however, failed to link irreligion with sexual immorality. Nugent repeatedly criticized the profligacy of Jamaica’s white men that, she wrote, resulted from their unwillingness to live as good Christians. Her thoughts on the slave trade emphasized this connection, as did her condemnation of overseers as men “without either principle, religion, or morality.”\textsuperscript{66} Most contemporary commentators on island life, whether residents or visitors, commented on the sexual licentiousness of white men with slave women and the consequent numerous “coloured” offspring. Interracial sexuality troubled Nugent because it blurred the racial division that also stood for all divisions between the “best sort” and their inferiors, and it destroyed the domestication of sexuality inherent in the culture of sensibility. But she never connected her critique of white men in general to her husband. Her repetitive references to “My dear N.” may have acted as an incantation, separating her husband from the masculine culture of his colleagues and subordinates, at least in the pages of her diary.

\textsuperscript{63} Quoted in Barker-Benfield, \textit{Culture of Sensibility}, 267.

\textsuperscript{64} The Methodists were originally opposed to slavery and racial separatism, but by the time of Roberts’s conversion ingrained white racism resulted in the first separate black and white churches. Continued tensions over slavery would result in a formal North-South denominational split in 1844. In 1805, northern Methodists were more critical of enslavement than most other religious groups. In Jamaica, Methodists had been engaged in missionary activities among the black population, both slave and free, since Thomas Coke’s visit there in 1789. The Anglican church did not at this time oppose slavery in Britain’s colonies.

\textsuperscript{65} Roberts manuscript, 66; Wright, ed., \textit{Lady Nugent’s Journal}, 98, 146.

\textsuperscript{66} Wright, ed., \textit{Lady Nugent’s Journal}, 87.
Roberts’s complete silence on these sexual issues distinguishes her from Nugent and other observers of island life, but might not be anomalous. Her years of living near the docks in New York City probably made prostitution, concubinage, illegitimacy, and liaisons across racial lines seem commonplace. While Roberts did not participate in that world of casual, coerced, or commercial sex, neither open sexuality nor exploitative relationships would have been unfamiliar to her.67 Roberts may not have traveled as widely as Nugent, but in her own way she was just as cosmopolitan.

Both women were keen to leave Jamaica as soon as the French threat to shipping and the embargo ended on June 22, 1805. Their writings depict early nineteenth-century Jamaica as a land of sharp contrasts: lush beauty and frightful sickness, opulent wealth and grinding penury, sensual indulgence and heartless cruelty, with absolutes of freedom and oppression affecting all social relations. The accounts offer a particularly rich comparative perspective. Leaving the familiar behind, both women examined their assumptions and their ideals. These two writers used the language of sensibility that dominated the books and magazines read by the burgeoning number of literate women. They described their marriages as sentimental love matches, even though neither enjoyed the private domesticity characteristic of the ideal. Writing offered them a space where the ideal could thrive. They found romance in travel, rhapsodized over beautiful landscapes, and sought out the unusual, the exotic. They anticipated the aesthetics of the modern tourist, although Nugent stayed too long to remain the wide-eyed visitor. Both women believed in the power of acute sensibility to transform human relationships. Empathy and sympathy operated more capaciously for Roberts and included enslaved people as well as family, whereas Nugent doted on her children and kin, but set boundaries that excluded non-gentry folk from her affectionate circle. Roberts was often a voyage or an illness away from poverty, Nugent was wealthy. They would not have socialized had they ever met, but they shared an understanding. Their ability to write also provided them with a place to create an independent sense of self out of their experiences and their perceptions—an individuality that transcended the dictates of the culture of sensibility.

But sensibility was just one facet of their lives. Their perceptions and, to a lesser degree, their actions in Jamaica’s slave society reflected their life experiences. Roberts was poorer than Nugent, but economically more self-sufficient. She had labored as a child and supported herself both during and after her marriage. Her mother and sisters provided additional sources of support. Women were resourceful in her world, although a man’s income was preferable, if accompanied by tender feelings. Her experiences led her to radical republicanism and to Methodism as well as to sympathy for other

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workers. She espoused liberty and fraternity, if not full equality. She exhibited a nascent feminism in her empathy for slave mothers, female friends, and all seafarers' wives. Her humanitarianism stopped short of advocating an end to the institution of slavery in Jamaica, but she called for the radical transformation of its labor relations from a system based on cruelty to one based on love and kindness. Her vision of reformation called upon individuals, especially those in power, to renounce past errors and become truly enlightened through the adoption of reason and heart religion. She was confident that other workers would benefit from liberty and philanthropy. This was a vision at odds with Nugent's assumptions.

Nugent was wealthy, upper class, sheltered, conservative, and elitist: she believed in the importance of a well-regulated society where everyone knew their place. Her religion was hierarchical and authoritarian, operating primarily through the imposition of rituals of baptism, catechism, confirmation, and marriage, rather than through the inculcation of faith. Whether directed towards sailors or slaves, her conscientious religious instruction reinforced her authority. Religion, and well-timed gifts and entertainments, forestalled disaffection from below. Nugent had some misgivings about the slave trade, but nothing in her background led her to object to slavery or to identify with the plight of the enslaved, even those, like herself, who were new mothers. While she supported certain reforms, her solutions gave those in power more political and moral authority. She was ambitious for her husband and endured lengthy separations from him as long as they advanced his career and the imperial interests from which it was inseparable. Her status depended on his position, and lacking any experience of independence herself, she did not seek independence for others. Experience, status, politics, and religion polarized Roberts and Nugent as much as sensibility united them.

Literate women at the beginning of the nineteenth century, writing for themselves in a generation of revolution and war, experimented with new possibilities, set and reset boundaries, observed, classified, and critiqued their worlds. Historians viewing the culture of sensibility arising from the literature of the second half of the eighteenth century have perhaps paid too little attention to the reception of those ideas among women of differing social positions, as if status and ideology were tangential to women's lives or only imposed by the attributes of their nearest male kin. Too often the meanings and reception of novels, authorship, and sensibility are subsumed under the single, uncontested rubric of middle-class formation. Eliza Chadwick Roberts, laboring to maintain herself in post-Revolutionary America, and Maria Skinner Nugent, rising into the ranks of the aristocracy in imperial England, allow us to observe the circumstances in which two very different women came to concur through their reading and writing on a single standard of gendered ideals in family life, but also how they diverged in defining, for themselves, their families, and society, the significance of freedom, independence, and enslavement as the "long eighteenth century" evolved into the industrial age.