Women and Migration

Responses in Art and History

EDITED BY

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41. Migration as a Woman's Right: Stories from Comparative and Transnational Slavery Histories in the North Atlantic and Indian Ocean Worlds

Gunja SenGupta

Transnational perspectives on slavery have yielded the important insight that migration makes meaning; that civic identities transform in transit from one place to another.¹ During the nineteenth century,

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- 1 For recent overviews of transnational history, see C. A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connelly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol, and Patricia Seed, 'AHR Conversation: On Transnational History,' *American Historical Review* 111 (December 2006), 1440–64; and the essays by Nancy F. Cott, Stephen Tuck, Jean Allman, and Matthew Pratt Guterl in 'AHR Forum: Transnational Lives in the Twentieth-Century,' *American Historical Review* 118 (February 2013), 45–139. For a recent global approach to slavery, see Joseph C. Miller, *The Problem of Slavery as History* (First David Brion Davis Lectures, Gilder-Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery and Abolition) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), and Robin Blackburn, *The American Crucible: Slavery, Emancipation and Human Rights* (London: Verso, 2011, repr. 2013). Earlier classics include Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); and for the West, David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), and *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). See also his *Challenging the Boundaries of Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

the march of abolition and empire balkanized and realigned the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds along political, philosophical, and jurisdictional boundaries of difference over slavery. An imperial behemoth loomed over these divisions on the high seas and the lands that bordered them. For that power — an expanding but fractious British empire — antislavery activism was at least partly a matter of defining and defending the material and moral foundations of imperialism, and about integrating rescued captives into their colonies as subjects and workers.² This essay is woven from the archival traces of an international cast of women on the margins, enslaved and free, in North

Historical geography has invented oceanic worlds as meaningful frameworks for the study of slavery histories. For overviews of Atlantic historiography, see Peter Coclanis, 'Atlantic World or Atlantic/World?', *William and Mary Quarterly* 63 (October 2006), 727–28, and Alison Games, 'Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities,' *American Historical Review*, 111 (June 2006), 741–57. See also James Sidbury, 'Globalization, Creolization, and the Not-So-Peculiar Institution,' *Journal of Southern History*, 73 (August 2007), 618; and Vincent Brown, 'Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery,' *American Historical Review* 114 (December 2009), 1231–49. Lauren Benton, 'Legal Spaces of Empire: Piracy and the Origins of Ocean Regionalism,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 47 (October 2005), 700–24, illustrates the role of law in constructing the oceanic regions that we use to organize knowledge about the 'global' and the 'local.' For a recent perspective on the politics of Black Atlantic scholarship, see Robert Stam and Ella Shohat, *Race in Translation: Culture Wars around the Postcolonial Atlantic* (New York: New York University Press, 2012). See also Patrick Manning, 'Africa and the African Diaspora: New Directions of Study,' *Journal of African History*, 44 (2003), 487–506. Gilroy has been criticized for neglecting the roles of both Africa and gender in shaping modernity; privileging the racialized 'minority' paradigm of the African American experience whereas the Caribbean is predominantly Black; and decrying essentialism while constructing the Atlantic world as 'black.' See Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, 'Rewriting the African Diaspora: Beyond the Black Atlantic,' *African Affairs*, 104:4 (2005), 35–68 (p. 37). On the diasporic nature of Africa itself, see Charles Piot, 'Atlantic Aporias: Africa and Gilroy's Black Atlantic,' *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100 (Winter 2001), 155–70. On the narrativization of 'routes/roots,' see Susan S. Friedman, *Mappings: Feminism and Geographies of Encounter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998). For the Indian Ocean, see Isabel Hofmeyr, 'Universalizing the Indian Ocean,' *PMLA*, 125 (May 2010), 721–29; Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: the Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

- 2 See, for example, the essays in Robert Harms, Bernard K. Freamon, and David W. Blight (eds.), *Indian Ocean Slavery in the Age of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); Van Gosse, "'As a Nation, the English Are Our Friends': The Emergence of African American Politics in the British Atlantic World, 1772–1861," *American Historical Review*, 113 (October 2008), 1003–28; and Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

America and British India, who appeared to seek reinvention through flight or emigration across borderlands erected by British imperial abolition. In the process, these women nudged, navigated, and narrated the international frontiers of contest over freedom's meanings at the intersection of many tropes of difference — of gender and class, and race and religion, writing themselves into the records that make history. But the disparate circumstances and voices of these women interrupted linear and universalist narratives of liberty's progress under the British flag in the nineteenth century, illustrating that context configured the interplay of freedom's meanings with gender, work, and family, quite differently from one oceanic world to another.³

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- 3 Seymour Drescher makes the point that the enslaved enter our field of vision in moments and spaces of conflict in 'The Fragmentation of Atlantic Slavery and British Intercolonial Slave Trade,' in Walter Johnson (ed.), *Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 234–55. On tropes of difference in African-American women's history, see Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, 'African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race,' *Signs* 17 (Winter 1992), 251–75. A few examples of the rich and voluminous literature on enslaved women in the US include Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1985); Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Kit Candlin and Cassandra Pybus, *Enterprising Women: Gender, Race, and Power in the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015); Tiya Miles, *Ties that Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Wilma King, "'Mad" Enough to Kill: Enslaved Women, Murder, and Southern Courts,' *Journal of African American History*, 92 (Winter 2007), 37–56; Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Mary E. Frederickson, Darlene Clarke Hine and Delores Walters (eds.), *Gendered Resistance: Women, Slavery, and the Legacy of Margaret Garner* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Andrea Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism, and Empire in India* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012); Brenda Stevenson, 'The Question of the Slave Female Community and Culture in the American South: Methodological and Ideological Approaches,' *Journal of African American History* 92 (Winter 2007), 74–95; Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy my Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 21–43; Pamela Scully and Diana Paton (eds.), *Gender and Slave Emancipation in the Atlantic World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005). On slavery in the Indian Ocean, see Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph C. Miller (eds.), *Women and Slavery: Africa, The Indian Ocean World, and the Medieval North Atlantic* (Athens: Ohio

Let us juxtapose, for comparative purposes, a spectrum of female figures engaged the discourse of imperial abolition as it traveled from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean. We begin in Canada West (present day Ontario), where in the early 1850s, the powerful voice of the African-American newspaper publisher and emigration advocate Mary Ann Shadd Cary rang out with a feminist vision of colorblind colonial citizenship under a benevolent female majesty. The action then moves across oceans back in time to a Delhi magistrate's *Kacceri* — a colonial office, a locus for the information-gathering, writing, authentication, and archiving that proved crucial to the daily operation and consolidation of empire.⁴ There, colonial bureaucrats mediated and inscribed into

University Press, 2007); Gwyn Campbell and Edward A. Alpers, 'Introduction: Slavery, Forced Labor and Resistance in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia,' *Slavery and Abolition*, 25 (August 2004), ix–xxvii; Indrani Chatterjee, *Gender, Slavery and Law in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999); Chatterjee and Richard Eaton (eds.), *Slavery and South Asian History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); Gwyn Campbell (ed.), *Abolition and its Aftermath in Indian Ocean African and Asia* (London: Routledge, 2005); Campbell (ed.), *The Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (Portland: Frank Cass, 2004); Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism, and Empire in India*; Dharma Kumar, *Land and Caste in South India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965); Utsa Patnaik and Manjari Dingwaney (eds.), *Chains of Servitude: Bondage and Slavery in India* (Hyderabad: Sangam Books, 1985); Gyan Prakash, *Bonded Histories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Deryck Scarr, *Slaving and Slavery in the Indian Ocean* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998); Clare Anderson, 'Convicts and Coolies: Rethinking Indentured Labour in the Nineteenth Century,' *Slavery and Abolition*, 30 (March 2009), 93–109; Richard B Allen, 'Slaves, Convicts, Abolitionism and the Global Origins of the Post-Emancipation Indentured Labor System,' *Slavery and Abolition*, 35 (June 2014), 328–48; Frederick Cooper, Rebecca J. Scott, Thomas C. Holt (eds.), *Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Post-emancipation Societies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Joseph E. Harris, *The African Presence in Asia* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1977); Benedicte Hjejle, *Slavery and Agricultural Bondage in South India* (Copenhagen: Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies, 1967); Martin A. Klein (ed.), *Breaking the Chains: Slavery, Bondage and Emancipation in Modern South Africa and Asia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993); Kumar, *Land and Caste in South India*; Kishori Saran Lal, *Muslim Slave System in Medieval India* (New Delhi: Aditya, 1994); Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life: Occidental, Oriental, and African Slave Trades* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Bernard Moitt (ed.), *Sugar, Slavery and Society: Perspectives on the Caribbean, India, the Mascarenes, and the United States* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2004); Jeanette Pinto, *Slavery in Portuguese India, 1510–1842* (Bombay: Himalaya Publishing, 1992); Thomas Sowell, *Race and Culture: A World View* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); James L. Watson (ed.), *Asian and African Systems of Slavery* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

- 4 Bhavani Raman, 'The Familial World of the Company's *Kacceri* in Early Colonial Madras,' *Journalism of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 9 (Fall 2008), [n. p.]; Olivera Jokic, 'Commanding Correspondence: Letters and the "Evidence of Experience" in

the archives the testimonies of 'freedom flights' by elusive enslaved concubines belonging to the local royal household, contributing to the reports that would shape the contours of slavery's 'delegalization' in British Asia. By placing these local perspectives within transnational and comparative frames of reference, we may contextualize and connect national (and nationalistic) histories and historiographies. These connections pit idealized African-American narratives of British abolition in the Atlantic world against imperial deference to slaveholding patriarchies in the Indian Ocean.

Mary Ann Shadd Cary came of age in a new republic founded in compromise on racial slavery. There, masters of human chattel constructed a mythology of the Old South as a patriarchal paradise populated by benevolent paternalists and happy slaves, and 'inhuman bondage' as a species of social insurance. Into this bipolar society divided starkly in law and etiquette into Black and white, and slave and free, where free Blacks were rendered an anomaly, Mary Ann Shadd Cary was born in 1823 into a relatively privileged free family of color of racially mixed descent in Delaware. The basic outlines of her biography are well known. As the slave state of her birth on the borders of the Mason Dixon line grew increasingly inhospitable to Black people during the antebellum era, Shadd Cary's father Abraham shifted his family to free Pennsylvania, where, in Westchester he set himself up as a shoemaker while immersing the family in abolitionist and Underground Railroad activism. His eldest daughter Mary Ann attended a private Quaker boarding school in Westchester, and entered the one profession open to African-American women in those days, teaching school across the Mid-Atlantic, from Delaware to Pennsylvania and New Jersey, while publishing controversial critiques of her community on grounds that ranged from charges of conspicuous consumption against the Black bourgeoisie, the alleged perpetuation of 'ignorance' and 'superstition' by Black churches, and the supposed preference for 'whining' over action by African American convention organizers. On the heels the draconian Fugitive Slave Act, which stripped suspected fugitives of their Fourth

the Letterbook of John Bruce, the East India Company Historiographer,' *Eighteenth-Century: Theory and Interpretation*, 52 (Summer 2011), 109–36; Mary Poovey, 'The Limits of the Universal Knowledge Project: British India and the East Indiamen,' *Critical Inquiry*, 31 (2004), 183–202.

Amendment rights, subjected them to arrest without a warrant, and no recourse to trial by jury, thus endangering entire communities of free Blacks, Shadd joined an exodus of people of color from the United States to Canada. She settled in the intimate farming community of Windsor, a spot that served as the first destination of refugees from slavery south of the border. With funding from the evangelical Christian abolitionist American Missionary Association, she established an interracial school.⁵ At the same time, she embarked upon tours of her newly adopted home, and researched its potential as a haven for American Blacks. Her labors materialized in a forty-page pamphlet, published in 1852 under the title, *A Plea for Emigration; or Notes of Canada West, in its Moral, Social, and Political Aspect: with Suggestions Respecting Mexico, West Indies, and Vancouver's Island, for the Information of Colored Emigrants*. The following year, she launched a newspaper, *The Provincial Freeman*, 'devoted to Anti-Slavery, Emigration, Temperance and General Literature.'⁶ Although male collaborators fronted as editors of this publication, Shadd Cary was its guiding light and de facto operator, thus blazing a trail for African-American women in the field of journalism.

As the label of the pamphlet, *A Plea for Emigration* suggests, Shadd Cary placed her data on Canada's climate, natural resources, and politics of race relations within a comparative framework informed by emigration debates raging within African America: whether to stay and fight for immediate abolition and civil rights within the US as Frederick Douglass championed, or to seek equality and opportunity in less formidable realms — whether Central and South America as Martin Delany argued, or to repatriate to Africa, as the American Colonization Society envisioned. At the same time, however, I argue

5 For a full length biography of Shadd Cary, see Jane Rhodes, *Mary Ann Shadd Cary: The Black Press and Protest in the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999). See also Rhodes, 'The Contestation Over National Identity: Nineteenth-Century Black Americans in Canada,' *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 30 (2000), 175–86; See also Jinx Coleman Broussard, *African American Foreign Correspondents: A History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013); Erica Armstrong Dunbar, 'Writing for True Womanhood: African-American Women's Writings and the Antislavery Struggle,' in Kathryn Kish Sklar and James Stewart (eds.), *Women's Rights and Trans-Atlantic Antislavery in the Era of Emancipation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 304–10.

6 Prospectus of the *Provincial Freeman and Weekly Advertiser*, electronic edition, African American Newspapers Collections, Accessible Archives, <http://www.accessible-archives.com/collections/african-american-newspapers/provincial-freeman/>, hereafter, the *Provincial Freeman*.

that Shadd Cary's emigrationist perspective sought to write women and people of color into a teleological, Hegelian representation of history as a march of freedom unfolding from east to west, and culminating, perhaps, in Vancouver's Island, within the framework of what Shadd Cary romanticized as a color-blind, antislavery empire with a woman at its helm. Within this haven, Vancouver would become, Shadd Cary wrote, 'the first island in importance on the globe.'⁷ This locale's destiny lay not in agriculture. Rather, Shadd wrote, 'The Western Continent, and particularly the northern part, say 'wise men of the east,' must eventually leave the eastern far in the distance (a fact that should not be lost sight of by colored men) and that over the Pacific will the trade with eastern nations be prosecuted.' Vancouver refueled whale ships en route to the northern seas, and lay directly in the path of trade with Asia, so that 'the people there settled, of whatever complexion, will be the 'merchant princes of the world,' under the protection of Great Britain.' From this angle, Shadd judged 'any eastern move [...], as for instance to Africa,' as a 'retrograde step.' Africa she deemed the colonizationists' 'land of promise,' a means of ridding North America of free Blacks, and particularly inhospitable to women of color. 'Tropical Africa' raised the specter of 'pestilence, a burning sun and fearful maladies,' in addition to 'big spiders, lizzards, snakes, centipedes, scorpions, and all manner of creeping and biting things.' The *Provincial Freeman* warned that complexion offered little guarantee of equal treatment. Gesturing to a derisive label forged in empire, she noted that 'colored nabobs' might prove hostile to less well-off newcomers, and 'as merciless as other men, when possessed of the same amount of pride, conceit and wickedness, and as much, if not more ignorance.' Nor did Mexico and South America offer attractive prospects of refuge, for they were weak states aligned with the Roman Catholic church. Only one government, Great Britain, promised to offer within her dependencies 'a *secure* home for the American slave, and the disgraced *free* man.'⁸ Shadd Cary exhorted her compatriots that while they could not be 'a whole African nation'

7 *A Plea for Emigration; or Notes of Canada West, in its Moral, Social, and Political Aspect: with Suggestions Respecting Mexico, West Indies, and Vancouver's Island, for the Information of Colored Emigrants* (Detroit: John W. Pattison, 1852), p. 43, hereafter, *A Plea*.

8 *A Plea*, p. 40

in Canada, they could 'be part of the Colored British nation. This nation knows no one color above another, but being composed of all colors, it is evidently a *colored* nation.' British soil, 'under the protection of the Queen' offered African Americans of both sexes their best chance at freedom.⁹ This argument added a feminist twist to familiar African-American proclamations of Anglophilia — an attitude anchored at least partly in Britain's perceived emancipationist leanings. These extended from the landmark colonial era court decision, *Somerset vs. Stewart*, through British invitations to the enslaved to join the loyalist cause on the promise of freedom during the American Revolution, the British role in the abolition of the international slave trade, and West Indian emancipation, to the hospitality that greeted African-American fugitives from slavery in British cities. African-American celebrations of Britain's ostensible commitment to liberty as a matter of moral principle served sought at least partly to cement a strategic political and diplomatic alliance with an officially antislavery imperial state.¹⁰ What Shadd Cary added to this connection was the observation that it was a female sovereign who steered the imperial project of freedom.

In this context, *A Plea for Emigration* portrayed Ontario as Black people's answer to the liberating mystique of westward expansion, in which geographical mobility offered a path to prosperity and personal reinvention. This land supposedly boasted a temperate climate, rich vegetation, arable land, plentiful timber, beautiful waterways, fine livestock, and affordable rural land prices, so that even men bereft of capital could 'with an axe and a little energy,' achieve 'an independent position.' Yet, it was the values of 'personal freedom and political rights,' that invested this soil with its most priceless quality, rendering it the genuinely liberated — and liberal — reverse mirror image of the US West.¹¹

But what, in Shadd Cary's worldview, did freedom really mean? In an age in which proslavery interests defended masters of the lash as benevolent paternalists, and chattel bondage as a form of 'poor law' for the inherently dependent, she upheld self-sufficiency, above all, as the hallmark of liberty. She famously clashed with the Refugee Home

9 *Provincial Freeman*, 15 April and 1 July 1854

10 On these points, see Van Gosse, 'As a Nation'.

11 *A Plea*, pp. 10, 8.

Society, run by fellow-émigré, the former fugitive slave Henry Bibb. The Society raised funds to purchase lands for resale to fugitive slaves. Shadd Cary criticized the venture for excluding 'nominally free' African Americans, and its leaders for allegedly lining their own pockets at the expense of their ostensible beneficiaries. But most of all, she charged that the Society's reliance on the largesse of white philanthropists reduced freed people to 'beggary.' That indiscriminate charity perpetuated stereotypes of the refugees' helpless degradation, playing, she seemed to be saying, into proslavery depictions of free societies as beset with 'the perils of pauperism,' class conflict, and radical ideologies of all stripes. *Plea for Emigration* quoted disparagements of such aid at length; 'We do not think it right that twenty-seven thousand colored persons, who are supporting themselves by their own industry, should lie under the disgrace of being called public beggars, when they receive nothing, and don't want anything.'¹² Her portrait of the settlement of Dawn, 'on the Sydenham river,' posed the very antithesis of the proslavery prognosis of free societies: 'Instead of [registering] an increase of vice, prejudice, improvidence, laziness, or a lack of energy,' this settlement was law-abiding, and paid 'due attention' to 'moral and intellectual culture.' Moreover, 'the former prejudices on the part of the whites, has given place to a perfect reciprocity of religious and social intercommunication. Schools are patronized equally; the gospel is common, and hospitality is shared alike by all.'¹³

Shadd Cary, then, embraced an emigrationist vision firmly embedded in trans-oceanic discourses over slavery, poverty and patriarchy. Deeply entangled with emerging global systems of capitalism and empire, her perspective melded Whig Poor-Law reformers' disdain for dependence with a Republican free labor vision of social mobility emerging on the US side of the Atlantic. The same Whig government that presided over the advent of Caribbean emancipation, also spearheaded a process to reform Britain's Poor Laws based on the principle that poor relief for the unworthy indigent encouraged laziness and immorality. The *Plea's* observation that 'boxes of clothing and barrels of provisions' dispatched to Canada by misguided US philanthropists had been 'employed to support the idle, who are too lazy to work,' but who comprised a minority of Canada's 'colored

12 Ibid., pp. 31–32.

13 *A Plea*, p. 22.

population,' smacked of Whiggish indictments of the so-called 'unworthy poor' on both sides of the Atlantic. The quintessentially American answer to proslavery charges of 'pauperism' in free society lay, of course, in the ideology of free labor associated with the Republican Party in the 1850s. This emerging politics of antislavery that articulated the aspirations of an unstable, inchoate middle class, defined freedom as self-ownership, and people as individuals with the right (indeed responsibility) to sell their labor power in free and competitive markets for labor in the US industrial capitalist order. Republicans maintained that such labor — if founded upon the values of hard work, sobriety and thrift — offered the potential for social mobility, and with it, the guarantee of harmony between capital and labor.¹⁴ Shadd Cary's celebration of the dignity of labor in Canada was steeped in Republican free labor thinking. A segment on 'Labor-Trades' in the *Plea* highlighted the demand for labor in Canada's thriving villages and its agricultural and timber sectors. Moreover, 'complexion' excluded no man from any trade. 'If a colored man understands his business, he receives the public patronage the same as a white man. He is not obliged to work a little better, and at a lower rate — there is no degraded class to identify him with, therefore every man's work stands or falls according to merit [...].'¹⁵ At the same time, Shadd Cary encouraged her compatriots of color to become entrepreneurs and small producers, buying land directly from the Canadian government, rather than contracting labor for planters elsewhere — even under British governance, say in Jamaica.

Shadd Cary's most striking and unique contribution, however, consisted in writing women of color — as wives, mothers, and workers — into these Anglo-American narratives of equal opportunity and sturdy independence. While the *Plea* said little about family or gender, the *Provincial Freeman* wove these themes into a compelling composite picture of the mutual workings of economic oppression, sexual abuse, and family breakdown in US communities riven by slavery and race prejudice. The newspaper highlighted injuries to women and families featured commonly in abolitionist novels and fugitive slave narratives: the specter of families separated on the

14 For a classic exposition of Free Labor Republicanism, see Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970). See also, Jonathan Glickstein, *Concepts of Free Labor in Antebellum America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

15 *A Plea*, p. 18.

auction block; of Margaret Garner killing her child in a hideout in Cincinnati rather than have it 'live as a slave'; a jealous Tennessee mistress scolding and hanging her husband's enslaved mistress; and a runaway ad for a slave mother with a 'nearly white' infant — a visible marker all at once of sexual abuse, perverse paternal ties, and the illogic of racial slavery.¹⁶

But in addition, the paper's spotlight on race prejudice north of the Mason-Dixon line illuminated the difficulties of creating or sustaining families even in the free states of the American republic. Black exclusion from all but the most menial of trades, and shrinking opportunities for property ownership drove African-American youth off to sea, leaving African-American women without prospective marriage partners or breadwinners.¹⁷ Shadd Cary's newspaper juxtaposed these accounts with the economic exploitation of working women in the US. 'Of all the classes of workers in this country,' one account began, 'the females are the most completely prostrated by under-paid labor. In no department of human industry is so much robbery endured and so much humiliating contempt inflicted, as upon poor, weak, working women.' The piece underscored that economic justice for women built both wholesome families and female virtue, for without it, 'no woman deprived of a husband or a father can be anything in America but a pauper and a beggar, unless by the sale of HER CHASTITY.' It reinforced the argument for emigration by placing ostensibly free Northern men on par with the worst despots of their sex in autocracies elsewhere: 'What is really the difference between the Russians flogging their women — the Southerners flogging their negro women, and the Northerners starving and cheating theirs?'¹⁸

This portrait contrasted forcefully with strategically placed arguments for women's rights within the British Empire. One article noted that Englishmen in general agreed that women 'may be a clerk, a partner, banker, a proprietress, a queen.' It went on to challenge the logic of limiting women from the public sphere of politics and the professions within an imperial realm under female suzerainty. 'A woman may be a nurse to both sexes. Oh, yes! And as a nurse or "granny" she may administer medicine, at second-hand, but to prescribe! Oh! That would be dreadful!

16 *Provincial Freeman*, 25 March, 1854; 3 November, 1855; 22 March, 1856; 2 February 1856.

17 *Provincial Freeman*, 27 January 1855.

18 *Provincial Freeman*, 15 August 1857.

All we have to say about this, is — Pshaw! It certainly but ill becomes us, to say a great deal against a Woman's having to do with politics, when at the head of our Government, the greatest and freest on [...] earth, stands a Woman, and she the very best Sovereign that ever swayed the British scepter [...]. And, by the way, the ruling of Queens will bear the most triumphant comparison with the ruling of Kings, past and present [...]. There now! Can you tell where we stand on Women's Rights?'¹⁹

It was clear where Shadd Cary stood on women's rights. Defined by the economic and political conditions necessary to sustain individual autonomy, personal integrity, and family life, such rights stood at the center of her conception of freedom. Mobility via emigration comprised a practical, activist mode of realizing such freedom. And British colonial nationalism under the protective eye of a female emperor offered the institutional framework for doing it.

But how did this idealized vision of imperial abolition measure up to colonial administration in the Indian Ocean? In what ways, for instance, did the relationships among empire, family, and freedom mutate as they traveled across the world to British South Asia? Historian Christopher Brown has argued that Britain emerged from the American War of Independence with a crisis of confidence, as well as a mission that fused the colonial project with the moral capital of antislavery policy.²⁰ As the nineteenth century opened, however, controversy over the ways in which the abolition of the international slave trade applied to British Asia tested the limits of that mission. Professions of good intent collided with the overriding imperial imperatives of political expansion and revenue collection, generating inconsistent and often arbitrary attitudes toward Indian forms of servitude. Indeed, intercontinental abolitionists and social reformers, as well as critics of British imperialism, made a compelling case that the imperial policy of legal pluralism had, in fact, created and codified forms of servitude not recognized by the East India Company's Muslim predecessors. Governor-General Warren Hastings had set the tone of British Indian law in 1772 by declaring that in 'all suits regarding inheritance, succession, marriage, castes, and other religious usages or institutions, the laws of the Koran,' would

19 *Provincial Freeman*, 12 August 1854.

20 Brown, *Moral Capital*.

govern Muslims, while the provisions of 'Shaster' would rule Hindus.²¹ Subsequently, British India's Calcutta-based supreme court of civil and revenue jurisdiction ruled that 'the *spirit* of the rule for observing the Muhammadan and Hindu laws was applicable to cases of slavery.' Abolitionists argued that this decision, ratified by the Governor General in Council in 1798, served as a principal instrument for the 'perpetuation' of slavery with the blessings of colonial rule, for among other things, it resurrected ostensible Hindu provisions governing slavery as interpreted by *pundits*.²² Two decades later, a chief judge of the same court, while proposing regulations for the guidance of courts of judicature on slavery cases, sought to establish legal grounds for Atlantic-style 'freedom' suits by or on behalf of the enslaved by raising the question whether the slaves claimed by masters were lawful slaves as interpreted by Muslim and Hindu jurists, by making maltreatment a grounds for dispossessing the master of his servile dependents, and moreover, by bringing these cases under the purview of the criminal rather than civil courts — in other words, making them not about property, but rather about personal freedom.²³ The proposal was never adopted. Yet, a patchwork of discordant colonial practices offered subalterns some maneuvering space. Thus for instance, Sir Charles Metcalf, Resident at Delhi, issued in 1812, a proclamation prohibiting the import of slaves into the areas under his jurisdiction for any purpose whatsoever. 'The Law regarding Slavery became, therefore, by force of this Proclamation different in that territory from what it is in any other part of British India.'²⁴

It is to the land where Metcalf once operated, then, that we now turn, to unearth the story of two alleged enslaved concubines from a royal household in colonial Delhi. These two fugitives ran headlong

21 Quotation taken from Eric Lewis Beverley, 'Property, Authority and Personal Law: Waqf in Colonial South Asia,' *South Asia Research*, 31:2 (2011), 155–82 (p. 158).

22 William Adam, *The Law and Custom of Slavery in British India: In a Series of Letters to Thomas Fowell Buxton, Esq.* (London: Smith, Elder, 1840), pp. 26–27, <https://archive.org/details/lawcustomofslave00adamrich/page/n6>

23 *Slave Trade (East India)*. — *Slavery in Ceylon* (The House of Commons, 1 March 1838), <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=SStDAAAACAAJ&lpq=PR1&hl=it&pg=PR1#v=onepage&q&f=false>, p. 322.

24 *Reports of the Indian Law Commission upon Slavery in India, January 15, 1841: With Appendices*, 2 vols. (India Office Records), vol. 1, p. 313, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008420865>

into the deference that British authorities had historically paid to the workings of elite Indian domestic establishments, whose custodians they sought not to alienate, as well as to the rhetoric of slavery as a 'domestic' institution, not subject to government regulation. These households often incorporated enslaved women into lineages they were expected to perpetuate through reproductive labor, earning certain privileges in exchange. In 1828, two such women scaled the walls that separated their royal *zenana* in Delhi from the world outside, and arrived in a colonial police station, pleading the right to leave the extended family they served. Colonial officials hesitated to free them, for the Mughal Sultan claimed them as his son's concubines. The women's restoration, then, became a matter of 'honour, [...] of the King himself and of the whole palace [...].' Edward Colebrooke, then Resident at Delhi, wrote that 'the palace is thronged with women of this description, kidnapped by persons employed for the purpose, and bought from those persons; [...] of the hundreds of brothers and sisters, sons, daughters, and grandchildren of his Majesty, scarcely one [...] will be found to have been born from any but such mothers.' The King expressed to colonial bureaucrats his apprehension that liberating the two alleged concubines would set a dangerous precedent that might invite other women in the palace under similar circumstances to follow suit. 'And he asks,' wrote the Resident, 'what would be the consequence if one of the Begums (wives) themselves should elope from the palace, and claim the protection of the police?' One of the women in the 1828 'elopement' case testified that she had been drugged and forcibly carried away from the sweet shop she had operated, passed off as a Muslim, sold to the prince, and mistreated by his wife. However, it was only when she swore that she had had no marital or sexual relations with any man in the *zenana*, that she was, rather a common servant — a testimonial buttressed by evidence of physical abuse that she presented — that the British government authorized her release. This case reflected then, the tensions and contradictions that shaped British definitions of slavery and freedom in India. On the one hand, it illustrated the spirit of the principle of the British law of slavery upheld since the 1770s, in which bondage lay in the realm of personal law, and assumed a special immunity from regulation when it emerged within the sanctum of familial relations within the patriarchal household. There was, in other words, no refuge from bondage as long as it was judged

a matter of *domestic* governance, not subject to trespass by outsiders.²⁵ Yet, Harrington's proposal and Metcalf's regulations — which defined slavery in terms of personal freedom rather than familial relations, and judged maltreatment grounds for emancipation, may have offered the women in question a resource for engaging the formal institutions of colonialism in their quest to escape oppression within the households that held them to service. In the long run, freedom flights of the sort effected by the Delhi refugees helped shape Parliament's rather peculiar view of abolition in British India. Instead of outlawing slavery outright, the ambiguity of servile statuses and conflicting claims to family and freedom prompted the imperial state to merely 'delegalize' slavery in India in 1843. This meant, among other things, that colonial bureaucrats reserved the right not to return fugitives from servitude to their masters.

In the Indian Ocean, then, as in the North America, the gendered trope of family supplied a key ingredient in the terms of debate over the meaning of freedom. Yet, Indian Ocean societies configured slavery's relationship with kinship and race constructs differently than did the American South. Within these diverse contexts of power, discourses of family supplied women with very different languages, symbols, and arguments to assert their claims to personhood against the prerogatives of masters and men, and of nation and empire. Such claims may not always have succeeded. Yet, they helped register these marginalized voices in the reports and records that shaped colonial discourses on slavery and freedom.

25 Edward Colebrooke to Chief Secretary Swinton, August 4, 1828; T. T. Metcalf, Esq., Judge and Magistrate, Delhi, to J. E. Colebrooke, August 2, 1828; Deputy Secretary Stirling to Colebrooke, August 29, 1828, all in Return to an Order of the Honorable The House of Commons, dated 1 March 1838; — for, COPIES OR ABSTRACTS of all Correspondence between the Directors of the East India Company and the Company's Government in India, since the 1st day of June, 1827, on the subject of SLAVERY in the TERRITORIES; under the Company's Rule; also respecting any SLAVE TRADE therein; also of all ORDERS and REGULATIONS issued, or any Proceedings taken, by Order or under the Authority of the Company, with a view to the Abolition of Slavery and the Slave Trade, since the above Date; also of any CORRESPONDENCE between the BOARD OF CONTROL and the COURT OF DIRECTORS on the said subjects, Ordered by the House of Commons, to be Printed, 31 July, 1838.

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