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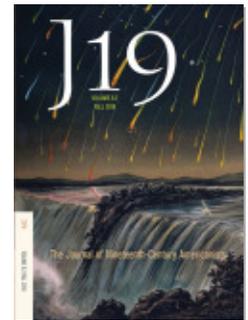
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J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists, Volume 6, Number 2, Fall 2018, pp. 229-231 (Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jnc.2018.0019>



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The Radicals' Reconstruction: Jewett at Port Royal

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I am grateful for Vesna Kuiken's recent essay ("Fit to Be Free: From Race to Capacity . . .") on Sarah Orne Jewett's "The Mistress of Sydenham Plantation" (Fall 2017). The historical and conceptual framework Kuiken provides for reading this understudied text expands our approach to the literature of Reconstruction, a valuable contribution that I believe might be extended by exploring further the story's interest in the role of Northern reformers in the implementation of Southern Reconstruction. To wit, following Kuiken's generative focus on the key concept of capacity, we might look to Jewett's treatment of the Port Royal Experiment for what it reveals about the co-optation of social radicalism in this period.

Reconstruction effectively began early in the war, when Union forces captured the South Carolina Sea Islands in 1861. White residents fled, abandoning vast plantation estates, a multimillion-dollar cotton crop, and ten thousand enslaved people. The federal government sought Northern teachers to instruct this black population not only in the usual schoolhouse subjects but also in "voluntary industry, self-reliance, frugality."¹ The reformers from Boston and New York who answered the call became known as Gideonites or Gideon's Band, although Jewett's story alludes to them only as "de good ladies f'om de Norf."² They were "a queer farrago" of "bearded and mustached and odd-looking men, with odder-looking women," who looked to one observer at the time like "the adjournment of a John Brown meeting or the fag end of a broken-down phalanstery!"³ In other words, the Port Royal Experiment was implemented by the kind of people previously associated with experiments

of a different kind—the socialist communes, gender bending, and anti-racist direct actions that antebellum social protest movements had generated. But these ultras were now charged with the decidedly conservative project of installing a capitalist wage-labor economy and enforcing norms like marriage and military service. Jewett's story places these reformers in ambiguous and intriguing relation to a set of codependent Southern amnesiacs in a mutually constructed time warp that involves the persistence of slavery decades after Emancipation.

Kuiken argues that Port Royal catalyzed a postbellum shift from a political and ethical discourse of rights to one hinging on economic and biological competence, as newly freed African Americans were tasked with proving that they could be functional capitalist subjects. In addition to the discourse of black capacity that Kuiken brings to light, Jewett's "Mistress" also raises questions for me about the frustrating *incapacity* of white Americans who took part in projects for black empowerment after Emancipation. Their new experiment turned out to replicate the old regime in many ways. The free people were paid for their work for the first time in their lives, but they were nevertheless forced to work, not by slave drivers but by Union soldiers and Northern cotton agents, their "new masters." The activist teacher Laura Towne, whom (as Kuiken notes) Jewett and Annie Fields visited in 1888, viewed this compulsory labor with apprehension, signaling the burden of complicity she felt as a member of the Port Royal Experiment even though her own motives were humanitarian and not commercial. She observed, "The danger now seems to be—not that we shall be called enthusiasts, abolitionists, philanthropists, but cotton agents, negro-drivers, oppressors." She noted with distress that the Gideonites were pressured to downplay their antislavery convictions and that some of her colleagues "do not even tell the slaves that they are free, and they lead them to suppose that if they do not do so and so, they may be returned to their masters," a form of psychological control that resonates profoundly with Jewett's story.⁴ Moreover, this troubling reversal hints at a broader shift in reform culture as many prominent activists turned from radical perfectionism to accommodationist expediency, overconfident in the state as a force of emancipation once the federal government nominally embraced this cause at long last. To name only one relevant example, the black radical Martin Delany, an agent of the Freedmen's Bureau on the Sea Islands, came to support the Democratic Party in the 1870s, in league with the white supremacist forces that disenfranchised African Americans in a reign of terror.

Kuiken describes the Port Royal Experiment as a “biopolitical training ground where pre-industrial blacks were disciplined into the liberal paradigm of freedom.” As the passive construction here indicates, this massive project comprised of a host of institutions and individuals with conflicting agendas, making it impossible to assign agency for its disciplinary project with precision. But Kuiken and Jewett have led me to wonder if it includes the good white ladies from the North. If the story is “a scathing critique of Reconstruction,” as Kuiken claims, it demands that we begin to unpack “Reconstruction” to pinpoint more exactly its target. Does the story critique the faithlessness of the federal government and the criminal activity of Southern whites? In what light exactly does it regard activists like Towne who embodied the “moment of absolute possibility” for a new national commitment to justice and equality, which she and others had hoped to deliver but could not?

Read in this light, “Mistress” seems less an indictment than an elegy. By the time Jewett visited the Sea Islands, Reconstruction was long over, and anyway, the state’s Black Codes had halted progress almost from the beginning, legislating new ways to enforce the old conditions of slave labor. Working still for the hope of emancipation, Towne must have seemed a holdover from a bygone era, soon to be willfully forgotten.

Notes

1. Edward Pierce, *The Negroes at Port Royal: Report of E. L. Pierce, Government Agent, to the Hon. Salmon P. Chase, Secretary of the Treasury* (Boston: R. F. Wallcut, 1862), 36.

2. Sarah Orne Jewett, “The Mistress of Sydenham Plantation,” *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1888, 149.

3. Quoted in Willie Lee Rose, *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 45–46.

4. *Letters and Diary of Laura M. Towne, written from the Sea Islands of South Carolina, 1862–1884*, ed. Rupert Sargent Holland (Cambridge, MA: Riverside, 1912), 55, 8.