

About the Excerpt

These excerpts are from Chapter 7, “The Captive’s Lament,” which reframes the captivity narrative of Mary Rowlandson. One of my goals in writing the book was to enable readers to better understand the Native places through which Mary Rowlandson traveled and the Native people with whom she traveled. The opening passage focuses on the experience of place and movement from two perspectives: the English mistress Mary White Rowlandson, who had just been taken captive from her town of Lancaster, and the Nipmuc leader Monoco, who led the raid in his homeland of Nashaway. One of the crucial concepts conveyed by the book and the digital companion is that colonial towns like Lancaster were built in Native homelands, like Nashaway. Monoco and his company were not merely striking an English settlement, but reclaiming the fertile planting and fishing place “between” rivers, which was part of their home. The second excerpt focuses on the travels of Mary Rowlandson and Weetamoo, the influential Wampanoag saunkskwa, a female leader who has often been neglected in histories of New England. Rowlandson was given to Weetamoo and her husband, the Narragansett leader, Quinnapin, and Rowlandson traveled with Weetamoo as she led families toward sanctuaries in Native homelands toward the north. Readers can navigate alongside Rowlandson, Monoco and Weetamoo and see images of these contemporary places via the digital companion to *Our Beloved Kin*, following “The Captive’s Lament” Path:

<http://ourbelovedkin.com:awikhigan:lament>

Thanks,

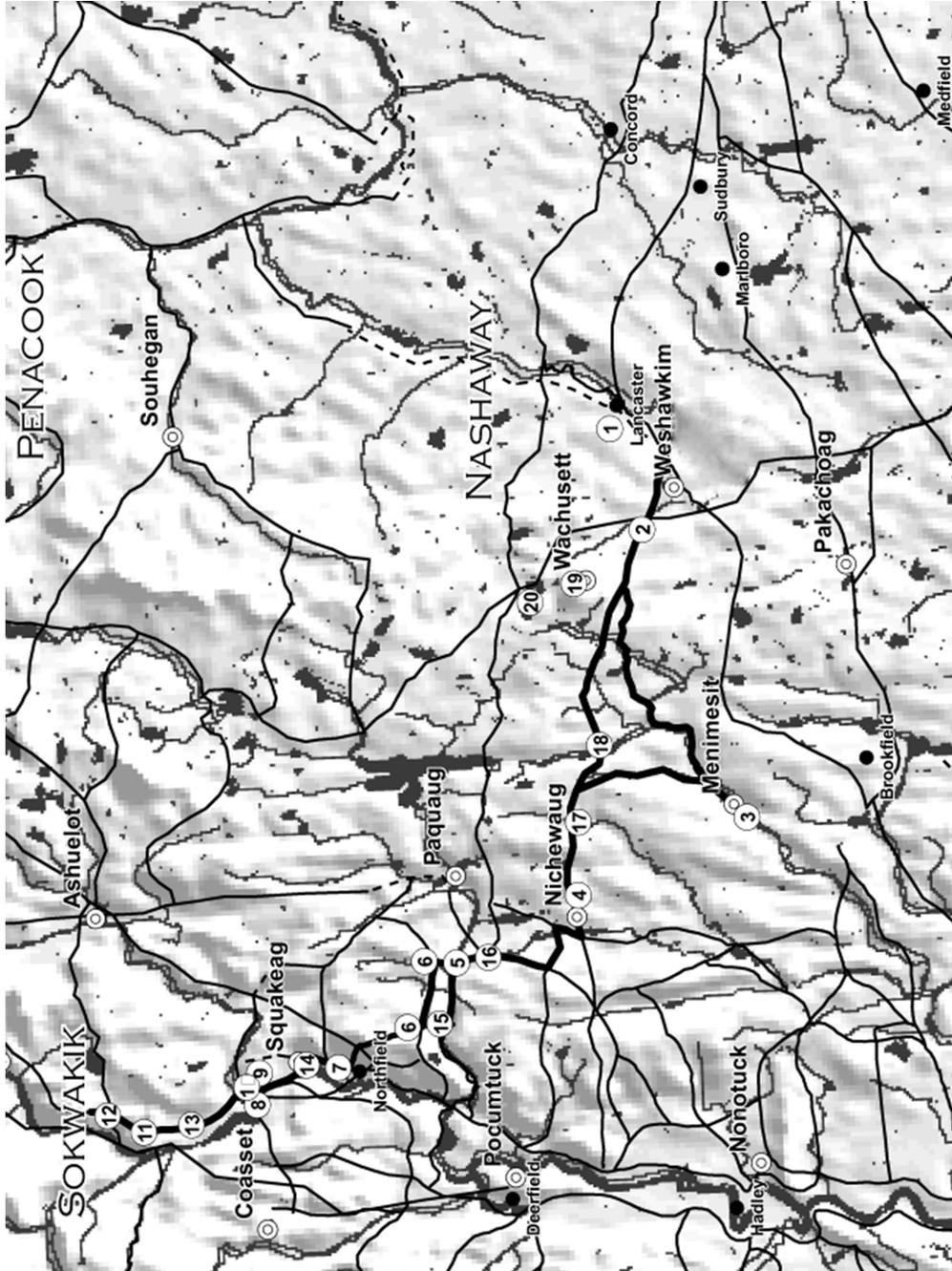
Lisa

THE CAPTIVE'S LAMENT: REINTERPRETING ROWLANDSON'S NARRATIVE

CAPTIVE GEOGRAPHIES, NIPMUC COUNTRY, FEBRUARY 1676

Following the raid on Lancaster, according to her own account, Mary Rowlandson and her captors camped the first chill night on a snow-covered hill only a mile from her town. Monoco and his men spent the evening singing and feasting, watching smoke rise from the ruins below. Rowlandson asked to sleep in an abandoned English house on the hill, "to which they answered," she wrote, "what do you love English men still?" This may have been the original trading post, built by Thomas King at the Nashaway crossroads. As the company began to move west along these old Nipmuc trails the next day, they traveled, in Rowlandson's words, "into a vast and desolate wilderness, I knew not whither."¹

In her narrative, Rowlandson described her regret as she was pressed to "turn my back upon *the Town*" and follow her captors into "*the wilderness*," constructing two spaces, diametrically opposed (my emphasis). "The Town" represented cleared colonial space, resembling the old towns of England. Although she acknowledged the existence of Native "towns" in her narrative, because the Nipmuc country remained a forested environment, held by Native people, she equated these homelands with an "uncultivated," "ungoverned," and "alien" expanse, using the familiar trope of "wilderness" to depict a place uninhabited, or inhabited only by the "barbarians" she feared, a "boundless and unknown" landscape awaiting transformation. For Rowlandson, the "wilderness" also represented a place of inner "solitude" and danger, where she could potentially "lose" her "way." As the "Pilgrim" traveler "walk'd through the Wilderness of this world," *Pilgrim's Progress* warned, the danger of chaos and uncertainty threatened to undermine faith in the order of God's design.²



12. Mary Rowlandson's removes

Yet, rather than being enmeshed in solitude, Rowlandson entered “an intricately webbed landscape,” known intimately to the Nipmucs with whom she traveled. This “vast” space was a “wilderness” because “whither” she went she “knew” it “not.” For Rowlandson, born in South Petherton, England, and raised in Wenham (outside Salem), her travel as an adult largely confined to Lancaster and “the Bay,” this was foreign territory. Indeed, the very place where she entered the “vast and desolate wilderness” was a mere ten miles from her home. Ironically, Rowlandson’s captivity was not marked by confinement, but rather forced movement through unfamiliar space. Her description of the “severall Removes we had up and down the Wilderness” reflects a discomfoting disorientation. Rather than moving west or north on defined riverways or trails, the company, in her estimation, moved vaguely “up and down” in their travels. Her lack of geographic knowledge made the forested landscape a prison. Her captivity laid bare her estrangement in the land that she called home. Her narrative itself fosters an uneasy dialectic, as the foreign is made familiar, and the Indigenous is constructed as foreign.³



The war party moved along a well-known route, some on snowshoes, some on horseback, traveling through snow-packed trails and biting cold. Monoco led with confidence and certainty, moving swiftly to avoid any English militia that might follow. Rowlandson struggled on foot, in trepidation and “sorrow,” until one of the men who had raided her town dismounted and allowed her to ride on horseback, her injured child in her lap. On one side of the trail, snow-covered and tree-lined ridges rose, protecting them from wind and the sight of colonial scouts. On the other side lay a network of frozen wetlands, thick pines reaching toward gray skies.

The further into the interior Rowlandson traveled, the more frightening and unfamiliar the land became. Swamps appeared dark and foreboding. Hills loomed before her—no vista provided a landmark for her location. The deeper she went, the more vulnerable she felt. Moving further from home, she had “no Christian friend near.” Her older children had been taken, “I knew not where.” Her husband, she noted, was “gone . . . separated from me, he being in the Bay.” He could not protect her, and if he came toward them, she said, her captors “told me they would kill him.” She could not even pray for rescue, without endangering him. She was especially concerned for the welfare of the six-year-old child she carried, “looking that every hour would be the last of its life.” Although her captors offered food, she refused it, wondering whether she and her “babe” would make it through the night, sleeping fitfully “upon the cold snowy ground.”

The further Monoco traveled along the trail, the more confident he became. He led his company from danger, toward a known destination, a place he had probably fished every spring and summer of his life. The swamps and forested ledges promised protection. The deeper he went, the more secure he felt. He knew he was moving toward his family, secluded and safe at Menimesit. Every step deeper into the interior made it less likely an English man would follow.



Indeed, any scout who tracked them would be heard or seen, defense easily accomplished. An unfamiliar traveler who attempted escape would be trapped by steep rises on the south and swamps to the north, sheer sheets of ice giving way to mucky waters; snow-covered hillocks, stones, fallen trees, and beaver dams would ensnare those on the run. For captives, the trail was effectively a prison. For militia, it presented a risky and treacherous venture into unknown space. For Rowlandson's captors, it was an ideal route to inland sanctuary.

A "TOWN CALLED MENIMESIT"

On the third day (Rowlandson's third "remove") of their travel, the raiding company arrived at their destination: in Rowlandson's words, "This day in the afternoon, about an hour by Sun, we came to the place where they intended, viz. an Indian town called Wenimesset, northward of Quabaug." The trail opened to a wide plain, full with the sounds of chattering families, the smoke of cook fires, and the barely discernible sensation of safety. Monoco had led them to one of the three encampments at Menimesit.⁴

To Rowlandson's surprise, Menimesit hardly fit her image of an unpopulated wilderness; she expressed astonishment at the large number of people who were gathered there: "Oh the number of Pagans (now merciless enemies) that there came about me, that I may say as *David*, Psalm 27.13, *I had fainted, unless I had believed.*" While straining to portray a nameless, faceless mass of foreign others, she revealed that this judgment was unmoored by her experience of this place and its populace. Although only twenty-five miles from Lancaster and ten miles from Brookfield, colonial scouting missions had been unable to locate the sanctuary. For Rowlandson and her fellow captives, this place was far from home, in their perceptions and their lack of geographic and social knowledge, if not in actual mileage. For Monoco and the protectors, it was a homecoming, and they were likely received with shouts of victory and gratitude for their safe return. After the celebration, the gift-giving began.⁵

INTO THE COUNTRY OF CORN, NICHEWAUG,
PAQUAUG, SOKWAKIK, MARCH 1676

CROSSINGS

Rowlandson had been at Menimesit for about two weeks when “the Indians began to talk of removing from this place, some one way, and some another.” Scouts, traveling familiar trails to colonial headquarters, had discerned that troops were mobilizing to launch a raid on Menimesit. James Quananopohit and Job Kattenanit had betrayed its location, and the Massachusetts Council had released them, along with four other men, from Deer Island to serve as guides. Observing the troops at Marlborough, the scouts may have seen their own relations among the colonial force. When colonial military leaders arrived at Quaboag, the thousands of people that had assembled three towns at Menimesit had already left. When Savage, Mosely, and their six hundred men finally pushed through the hills north of Quaboag, they found empty meadows and the wet coals of abandoned fires.²⁰

Leaving Menimesit, Weetamoo headed north on an old through-trail, accompanied by many families, their captives with them, once more moving through rugged, yet familiar country, deeper into the interior. In Rowlandson’s estimation, they traveled through snowy woods to “a desolate place in the Wilderness, where there were no Wigwams or Inhabitants before.” Yet this place, known as Nichewaug or “between land,” entrenched in deeply protected marshes, icy waters, and thick pine forest, was at the crossroads of trails. Among their company were likely those who had hunted and fished here. Nichewaug was not their destination, but a camp where they could safely regroup and rest, dry off by a fire, and perhaps hunt, en route north. Here they camped for “about four dayes,” leaving “this place,” Rowlandson “thought,” only when they believed “the English Army” was “near.”²¹

“They went,” Rowlandson observed, “as if they had gone for their lives, for some considerable way, and then they made a stop, and chose some of their stoutest men, and sent them back to hold the English army in play whilst the rest escaped.” Her evasive use of “they” here is telling, since Weetamoo was likely among the leaders who devised this strategy. Just as they had done at Pocasset, decoys distracted the militia from tracking the families as “they marched on furiously” towards the north.²²

“In this travel,” the captive relayed, “because of my wound, I was somewhat favored in my load; I carried only my knitting work and two quarts of parched meal. Being very faint I asked my mistress to give me one spoonful of the meal, but she would not give me a taste.” While Rowlandson characterized this rejection as hardhearted, Weetamoo was required to distribute corn equally among “hundreds,” over the long haul. Long journeys required strategic rationing; even in peaceful times, traveling companies consumed only limited amounts. In camp, the “two quarts” of ground corn would be transformed into bread, porridge, and stews. In winter and in war, Weetamoo had to conserve the short supply.²³

Furthermore, Weetamoo was clearly toughening the Puritan “mistress,” teaching her to carry her weight like any other woman. Rowlandson observed that “the greatest number at this time with us were” women and “many” carried babies “at their backs.” They traveled “with their old, and with their young: some carried their old decrepit mothers, some carried one and some another. Four of them carried a great Indian upon a Bier; but going through a thick Wood with him, they were hindered, and could make no haste; whereupon they took him upon their backs, and carried him, one at a time, till they came to Baquaug River.” At the crossing they built rafts from deadwood and cushioned them with evergreen “brush,” then traversed the wide Paquaug River. Crossing during rapid spring melt, some carried wounded kin and elders. Rowlandson reported, in dismay and disgust, that “on that very day came the English army after them to this river, and saw the smoke of their wigwams, and yet this river put a stop to them.” In her narration, she seemed at a loss to explain how Native women were able to accomplish what English men could not.²⁴

“A SEVERE AND PROUD DAME SHE WAS”

The Wampanoag saunkskwa and the English mistress “read” each other’s behavior through culturally specific frameworks. Although mystified by Native women’s strength and power, Rowlandson appeared most troubled by Weetamoo’s failure to adhere to the bounds of English frames of race and gender.

war. Even as Rowlandson familiarized Weetamoo's femininity, she performed a "strategy of separation." In contrast to her humanizing portrayals of male leaders such as Metacom and Quinnapin, Rowlandson's depictions of Weetamoo emphasized the saunkskwa's otherness and "arrogance," revealing her own resistance to accepting Weetamoo's role, her fear of being associated with the dangerous power that Weetamoo represented, as well as a clash over the place and role of women within conflicting political and cultural systems. After all, if Rowlandson accepted Weetamoo's position at Menimesit, she might question her own in New England.²⁷

Just as Rowlandson criticized Weetamoo's failure to behave as a proper goodwife, Weetamoo likewise reprimanded Rowlandson for failing to act like an *Algonquian* woman, particularly for displaying weak or selfish behavior. Women in Weetamoo's community were expected to be strong and self-sufficient, carrying their weight. In contrast, when Rowlandson was made to travel with her "load at [her] back," she found it tremendously challenging. "One hill" in Sokoki uplands made her faint; it "was so steep that I was fain to creep upon my knees, and to hold by the twigs and bushes to keep myself from falling backward." Rowlandson, "reel[ing]" as she "went," became another burden that Weetamoo and the women had to carry.²⁸

In Lancaster, Rowlandson had been largely confined to the domestic space of her house and town. She rarely walked far and was not required to carry large loads; she never would have traveled beyond her town without her father or husband. Although Rowlandson portrayed these challenges as part of the terrible conditions of captivity, this kind of travel would have been part of the seasonal cycles for Algonquian women (although usually not under the duress of war). Colonial chroniclers like Roger Williams attributed the comparative ease they had in childbirth to some essentialized savage state; in truth, their lifestyle defied English attitudes about the inherent weakness of women and demonstrated the physical and mental strength and endurance that women could develop from engaging in challenging physical activity. In some ways, Puritan women like Rowlandson were held captive by the cultural beliefs and practices that kept them from performing the movement that would strengthen their bodies and minds.

"A VAST AND HOWLING WILDERNESS": SOKOKI GREAT SWAMP

Having successfully crossed the wide river, Weetamoo, Rowlandson, and the families constructed shelters and encamped for several days in the Native town of Paquaug, on the north bank. Under normal circumstances, they might have

encountered other families here, offering food stored from the harvest. It was one of several places that John Pynchon would send scouts, looking for cornfields, the next summer. Those families, though, had also moved north, and after resting, Weetamoo and the women continued to trek northwards. As the “English Army” approached the river at early morning, Rowlandson observed, the women “set their Wigwam on fire, and went away.”²⁹

Knowing the river had halted their pursuers, Weetamoo and the families took to the major east-west Indigenous highway (now renamed, for tourism, “the Mohawk Trail”). Rowlandson characterized her journey as wandering like “one astonished” through a maze, but Weetamoo moved through a territory mapped with trails and subsistence sites. Trekking westward on this exceptionally “cold morning,” they soon came to “a great Brook with ice on it,” which they had to cross. While “some waded through it, up to the knees & higher . . . others,” including Weetamoo, “went till they came to a Beaver dam.” Following her “mistress,” Rowlandson considered herself fortunate that she “did not wet [her] foot.” Although Rowlandson attributed her safe passage across this natural bridge to “the good providence of God,” it was Indigenous knowledge of this trail and its crossings that protected her from discomfort and the danger of hypothermia. Rowlandson’s unfamiliarity with and fear of “swamps,” often sustained by such beaver dams, dominated her depiction of the landscape. As they diverged northwards onto a narrow trail, rising into the hills, she found herself surrounded by ridges and wetlands, the cold fog heavy in early March, the great pines looming overhead. “I went along that day mourning and lamenting,” she wrote, “leaving farther my own Country, and traveling into the vast and howling Wilderness.”³⁰

Yet Weetamoo and her company traveled a well-worn trail, once followed, in fact, by Gookin, HENCHMAN, Prentice, and Beers, seven years before, as they sought new lands on which to settle in the interior. They moved alongside a brook that would soon teem with fish and spring runoff, through marshes that would ring with the song of spring peepers. They traveled through territory that must have sustained Sokoki families, hunting deer and moose in the uplands, through many winters. When they arrived at the Sokoki “great Swamp,” beside “the trail from Nichewaug to Squakeag,” Weetamoo and the women stopped to camp, in a bowl sheltered among frozen waters and rising peaks, which would keep English men at bay. Yet, Rowlandson remarked, “The Swamp by which we lay, was, as it were, a deep Dungeon, and an exceeding high and steep hill before it.” To her, the expanse of wetlands and surrounding high ground only solidified her feeling of imprisonment.³¹

The women took to building their camp, which Rowlandson described as the cacophony of “a thousand Hatchets going at once.” Gazing upon the encampment from the trail at the “brow of the hill,” she first thought they “had come to a great Indian Town” because, although the group consisted only of “our own company,” the “Indians were as thick as the trees.” Looking “before” her, “there was nothing but Indians, and behind [her], nothing but Indians, and so on either hand,” she found herself “in the midst, and no Christian soul near.” Ironically, her account displaced the other “Christian souls” around her, including fellow captives as well as the Christian Indians who traveled with Weetamoo’s company. Indeed, Rowlandson did not name a single Native person during this travel from Menimesit to Sokwakik. Instead, the multifaceted community appeared a nameless, faceless mass of “Indian” others, swinging “hatchets” in the foreboding, dank “dungeon,” resembling devilish creatures in some underworld hollow.³²

Yet, as Weetamoo knew from her experience with English troops at Pocasset swamp, such places could function as a snare for colonial troops on their trail. Weetamoo and her company had successfully made the Paquaug River a barrier to the militia, and then diverged to a rugged, lesser-known trail, utilizing the swamps as camouflage, hiding even their large company. Their longstanding knowledge of the environment enabled their survival. Still, at any moment, the Christian Indian “souls” among the English troops might utilize their own environmental knowledge, leading the troops to discern their track northward in the mud and snow. Yet, here, in this protected swamp, scouts could keep watch, and potentially ambush any English parties before they got to the families, as they had at Menimesit and Pocasset. Still, if they remained too long, the swamp could prove a trap for the families, who could not quickly traverse those steep hills or frozen wetlands to seek safety. If they were to secure sanctuary, they could not rest for long before continuing their journey north, not toward an unmapped wilderness, but toward Kwinitewk, a country of corn.

TO BE MADE USEFUL: ADAPTATION AND EXCHANGE

After “a restless and hungry night” in the great Sokoki swamp, they climbed the “high and steep hill,” and continued northwest. To Rowlandson’s surprise, rather than moving deeper into “wilderness,” signs of English settlement appeared along the descending trail: “As I went along, I saw a place where English cattle had been: that was comfort to me, such as it was.” Soon after, she recognized a distinct change in the road ahead: “we came to an English Path, which