

Travel as Subversion in 19th Century Black Women's Narratives

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Abstract

Race and gender proved to be two daunting obstacles for African American and Afro-Caribbean women in the 19th century; thus success outside those domains often depended on women's ability to keep a strong feminist stance. Prescribed female roles and racial prejudice hindered many in their ambitions and endeavors. This paper argues that some 19th century black women's narratives, however, point to a body of resistance texts in contention with prescribed roles for such women. The textual personas of such narratives transcend the confines of home and racially-configured communities. In fact, the narratives foreground a female agency where personal worth and identities are reconstructed through traveling and working in the global arenas and economies of the 19th century world.

Keywords

Black Women, Agency, Liminality, Transnational, Travel, Subversion, Narrative, Transgression, Travel/Travelers, Imperialism and Female Agency

1. Introduction

International travel, both voluntary and forced, was instrumental in fostering a new world economic structure (capitalism) as well as central to inspiring a distinctive literary tradition of travel writing. Captive Africans as both the commerce and the creators of new world commerce developed a unique narrative tradition based on the results of their forced movement between continents. As primary victims of the new capitalist order, they were subject to categorizations and constructs that shaped their discursive presence in the resulting transatlantic discourse. Such categorization was particularly evident in representations of the black woman. Epistemological power and status of race and gender were, indeed, defining constructs for all new world women. While a genre known as the

slave narrative emerged as a counter discourse to such “master narratives,” investigations of a particular body of narratives focusing on black women’s travel interrogate the notion of geographic boundaries and social condition as defining factors of black womanhood in the construction of the African Diaspora of North America. Considerations of autographical narratives of black women, like those of Mary Jane Seacole (1990) and Nancy Gardner Prince (1995), deconstruct and liberate the image of black women from their textual status as inferior creatures bound to the plantation or the domestic sphere, because, though they were well aware of the proper comportment expected of free “ladies” of color and of their station, these women engaged in activities that would be considered by their contemporaries as extraordinary. Seizing travel and writing as a liberatory mode of expression, they gain agency as speaking subjects rather than as objects in a hegemonic master narrative.

2. Critical Scholarship

While there are numerous scholarly critiques of international travel, Edward Said’s classic study *Orientalism* (1978) was among the first to help inspire a distinctive literary analysis of travel accounts as a discourse. Others, especially feminist critics, followed with studies of these texts along gender lines. In her book, *The Witness and the Other World* (1991), for example, Campbell (1991) studied medieval European travel accounts, including works by pilgrims, merchants, and explorers. She interpreted these works in light of the Crusades, European expansion in the early modern era, and European domination of the world in modern times. By her account, pilgrimage and the quest for trade directly foreshadowed crusade and conquest, so Campbell viewed medieval travelers themselves as agents of European imperialism. Pratt (1992) offers a similar analysis in her book, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. In the text, she looks at European travelers who visited Africa and South America during the 18th and 19th centuries. According to Pratt, accounts of these travelers contributed to imperialism by producing for imperialist readers a world that was ready for European domination.

This focused attention on European travel and travel writing loses sight of the larger global context of travel and travel writing, which were by no means monopolies of European and Euro-American peoples. Bentley (2004) studied travel narratives and suggests that:

In a way, all historical thinking and all historical writing deal with travel accounts. They do not necessarily involve the physical removal of historians’ bodies to distant lands, but they require historians to engage with different interests and perspectives in the world of the past, which some scholars have likened to a foreign country. Even one’s own society can seem foreign when a historian explores the changing political, social, economic, cultural, environmental, and technological conditions of earlier ages, not to mention different beliefs, values, and customs of times past. Yet travel ac-

counts representing the observations and experiences of individuals who visited foreign lands constitute a special category of primary source for historians (Travel Narratives).

There are, as well, others whose works have been paramount to the study here, among them Fish, 2004; Gunning, 2001; Foster, 1994 and Haywood, 2003. Davies' (1994) seminal study, *Black Women, Writing and Identity. Migrations of the Subject*. Boyce Davies' work carefully re-situates black women writers as agents whose diasporic identities involve a unique critique of their impact on the process of empire-building in the Atlantic world.

The current work contributes to and extends this critical work by offering a rereading of literary representations of migrations or "removes" of black people, especially women in the U.S. and the Caribbean, where women become the speaking subjects of the migratory experience. The contention here is that such re-readings reveal a re-spatialization of the discursive as well as geo-political maps of the African Diaspora experience in the Atlantic world. Specifically, the travel narratives of Prince (1995) and Seacole (1990) deconstruct a cultural memory which has tended to marginalize black women's impact on defining and shaping the contours and character of the historical discourse of African people in the Americas. Travel narratives represent one of these sites of cultural memory, and one can argue that the narratives of these women have the effect of disrupting the power status of race and gender as defining constructs; they further interrogate nationalist narratives of belonging and geographic boundaries as containing discourses of black female identity.

A Theoretical Framework: Victor Turner and Liminality

Turner's (1975) and van Gennep's (1960) studies on liminality provide a critical perspective for this paper. One perplexing question might be how was travel possible when black women's lives in the 19th century were among the most economically, socially, and politically circumscribed? From a critical perspective, however, it can be argued that black women have primarily existed in a liminal state in European and American societies, as social hybrids within the imperialistic, hegemonic patriarchies of these societies. States of liminality, as Turner (1975) suggests, represent unlimited possibilities from which social structures emerge. While in the liminal state, he argues, human beings are in between the social structure, temporarily fallen through the cracks, so to speak, and it is in these cracks, in the interstices of social structure, that they are most aware of themselves. It is thus a state that fosters identity-formation, as it is—in Turner's perspective—a midpoint between a starting point and an ending point. During the liminal stage, the between stage, one's status becomes ambiguous; one is neither here nor there, one is "betwixt and between" fixed points of classification, and thus the form and rules of both his/her earlier state and his/her emerging state are suspended. He argues that it is from the standpoint of this marginal zone that the great artists, writers, and social critics have been able to

look past the social forms in order to see society from the outside and to bring in a message from beyond it.

In van Gennepe's *rite of liminality* (1960), a phase of ritual passage/initiation, the liminal zone is potentially dangerous as the individual is between social roles. While this subaltern or marginal position may reassert the authority of one discourse or group over another, the oppressed group can also use their marginality to subvert the hegemony of authority (Forgacs, 2000). Black women then, in this paradigm, negotiate not only a world where sexism and racism collude to hold them prisoners, but they also liberate themselves by actively engaging their liminal space and renegotiating both geographical and discursive maps of their existence. The extent to which the experiences of travel reshape Prince's (1995) and Seacole's (1990) conceptualization of identity, belonging, and self is of critical importance in this study. Cultural identity, migration, homelessness, exile-ness, and borders-metaphoric and geographic—are links in the expression of new world Africana women's identity during and immediately after slavery; thus the study here elaborates this dimension of their experiences and underscores key insights about the uniqueness of their travel writings.

In the lifetime of Nancy Prince and Mary Seacole, prescribed female roles and racial prejudice hindered many in their ambitions and endeavors, but these particular writers reveal a constant resistance to the expectation that women's work is nurturing children and husbands and that black women's roles were those of servitude and enslavement. It is remarkable to note that the textual personas in these women's narratives transcend the confines of their home and racially- configured communities. In fact, Prince and Seacole find their personal worth and identities working in the global arenas and economies of their 19th century world. If, as it has been suggested, Frederick Douglass' narrative depicts the ontology of black manhood under slavery (Smith, 1991), then it might be claimed that Prince and Seacole, among others present an ontology of potential black womanhood during the height of liberatory struggle of African people in the New World. In real terms, acts/actions of self-creation represent dramatic assertions that black women are individuals and not just objects owned and trampled between the weight of socio-economic oppression. "Though they were living a restrictive environment...their movement is not [just 'the break away from the imprisoning community [but rather] a reenactment of America's secular drama of selfhood" (Foster, 1985: p. 33). Historically, not a lot of scholarly attention has been paid to 19th black women's narratives. Fortunately, as a result of the publication of the Schomburg Collection of Writing by 19th century black women, a number of seminal studies have appeared in the last 30 years (Lowenberg & Boggin, 1977). One such scholar, Busia (1991) refers to women's autobiography/biography as "a mode of rebellion and liberating history" (1991, p. 88). Thus the ability of women "to inhabit their own stories and to become the subject of their own histories can be of itself an act or gesture of rebellion" (Busia, 1991: p. 89). In the process they give a mediation on the community and by extension their role in it. Since Prince and Seacole could speak/write themselves, they are

the agents of their own texts. As articulating selves they were speaking and self-inscribing selves, and this became their new identity in an environment that attempted to discursively and physically contain them in an *enclave* of slavery and servitude.

One scholar whose work occupies a seminal status in the field of travel narratives is Fish (2004). Her study, *Black and White Women's Travel Narratives* (2004), undertakes critical examinations of the travel literature produced by Nancy Gardner Prince and Mary Seacole and a re-consideration of Margaret Fuller's *Summer on the Lakes* (1844). All three women stepped outside the "women's sphere" of domesticity and created public reputations for themselves, in part by employing travel accounts to help shape liberating role models for women contending against enforced domesticity. Fish (2004) makes clear that her goal is to ensure that Prince and Seacole, two black women, receive similar centrality to Margaret Fuller in global cultural studies. This work is part of a shift away from a white-dominated paradigm of travel literature studies. This re-centering of the black woman's experience in travel provides a vastly more accurate and representative depiction of travel as a common human experience. Fish (2004) contextualizes Fuller, Prince and Seacole within the development of what she refers to as a resisting agency gained by an ability to transcend locations of containment and thus transgress predetermined social stations prescribed for them by white male power structures.

The journey accounts of Nancy Gardner Prince and Mary Jane Grant Seacole represent a case of intellectual and political resistance to racial and gender inequalities gained through their observations and experiences of travel and are, thus, subversive. Neither of them was on a tour for tourism's sake or had the financial ability to undertake an extended voyage; rather, they were women of modest means who traveled with definite motivations which defied the oppressive institutions created for women of the 19th century which limited their access to professional opportunities, philanthropic and activist efforts, and reflective observation. They are contemplative testimonies on how some oppressed women gained a sense of themselves and their subjectivity through geographic shifts in time and space. Such descriptive cartographies give evidence of the writers' witness to an imperialist agenda of American and European nations, one where the construction of state power and capital formations subordinated the lives of women, peoples of color, and numerous disenfranchised classes. Thus, as Fish (2004) has suggested, their travel accounts are in contestatorial dialogue with and subvert master narratives of nation and nationhood, class, race and gender.

3. Nancy Garner Prince: From New England Kitchen to Imperial Court

In his review of Justin Edwards and Rune Graulund's study, *Postcolonial Travel Writing: Critical Explorations*, Pulugutha (2011) notes their definition of travel writing as "an interdisciplinary genre." Pulugurtha goes on to say that it "has

become an important area of study” and that it is “closely linked to issues of Imperialism, Diaspora, multiculturalism, nationalism, identity, gender, globalization, colonialism and post-colonialism” (2011, p. 1):

It brings into play ideas of transculturation, the idea of the centre and the margin, border crossings, hybridity, location and displacement. Travel entails a movement away from a familiar place and location to an unfamiliar one, a new place, one that is different from one’s home. This difference may often pose threats to one’s identity as it brings into purview ideas of the self and the other. Hence travel and travel writing raise important questions. How does postcolonial travel writing represent this idea of identity, self and otherness? (Pulugutha, 2011: p. 1)

The border crossing, self awareness aspect of travel is observed by Nathaniel Hawthorne in an 1826 travel sketch describing a trip on a steamboat across the Canadian lakes. Hawthorne wrote that as a passenger, one is afforded “opportunities for a varied observation of society” (qtd. in Haywood, 2003: p. 51). Hawthorne’s “varied observation” indicates that a large and diverse group of people was traveling in nineteenth-century America. Writing as a passenger “in the grand cabin,” Hawthorne describes the condition of travel and his fellow travelers from a position of privilege, glossing over passengers of the other sections as the “commonality and multitudes.” (qtd. in Haywood, 2003: p. 51). However, among those traveling on the decks of such steamboats were women whose voyages and reasons for travel contrasted greatly with Hawthorne’s.

One such passenger on ships like Hawthorne describes was Nancy Gardner Prince. Born a free black in Massachusetts, she wrote her narrative, *A Black Woman’s Odyssey through Russia and Jamaica*, in 1850. “Prince begins her narrative by identifying herself as what Frances Foster refers to as “a member of a strong but peripatetic family group” (Foster, 1985: p. 28):

I was born in Newburyport, September 15th, 1799. My mother was born in Gloucester, Massachusetts-the daughter of Tobias Wornton, or Backus, so called. He was stolen from Africa when a lad, and was a slave of Captain Winthrop Sargent; but, although a slave, he fought for liberty. He was in the Revolutionary army and at the battle of Bunker Hill...My grandmother was an Indian of this country; she became a captive to the English, or their descendants...My father, Thomas Gardner, was born in Nantucket; his parents were of African descent... (Prince, 1995: p. 1)

Her work is a unique opportunity to examine nineteenth-century racial and gender constructs through the eyes of someone who felt the effects of such oppressive social practices. And yet, Prince’s narrative is not about being oppressed but is a testimony to the contentious nature of travel for the oppressed in that hers is, instead, a journey of self-discovery and self-fulfillment. Prince’s narrative depicts a woman far from trampled by the weight of societal oppression. While still a young girl, she rescued her older sister from a brothel and worked to sup-

port her mother, sisters and brothers. She married Nero Prince, a founder and Grand Master of the Prince Hall Freemasons in Boston (Grimshaw, 2010).

After their marriage, they traveled to Russia where Nero Prince was attached to the court in St. Petersburg of Czar, Alexander I. While her husband was busy at court, Prince demonstrated her entrepreneurial skills by opening a boarding house and making and selling infant clothing. This activism on her part, even in a state of homelessness (liminality) in a strange land, extends both the geographic and the literary map of 19th century black womanhood. Collins (1990) notes that concrete experience, is important as a criterion of meaning in African American women's thought systems. Prince captures this concreteness in her detailed descriptions of Russian life and remarkable adventures at the court of Czar Alexander I at a time when most of her African American sisters in the U.S. and the Caribbean were in bondage. Her text bears witness to and records remarkable historical events. She not only comments on slavery in the U.S. but also describes the great 1824 flood of St. Petersburg, the deaths of Emperor Alexander I and Empress Elizabeth, and the political turmoil which followed the Revolt of 1826. Prince's business grew, and she hired several employees. She earned additional income by boarding children, and her interest in child welfare led her to establish an orphan's home in St. Petersburg, as well as assess the conditions of people in the society around her, who seem to have been a class below her own:

The first twenty months after my arrival in the city, notwithstanding my often infirmities, I labored with much success, until I hired with and from those with whom I mostly sympathized, and shared in common the disadvantage and stigma that is heaped upon us, in this our professed Christian land ... I [know I] am a wonder unto many, but the Lord is my strong refuge... I shall fear no evil... (1995: pp. 86-88).

Prince's narrative recounts details of historical events that she witnessed in not only Russia, but in Copenhagen and the West Indies. She offered eyewitness accounts of a major natural disaster, commentary on political upheaval in St. Petersburg, and her insights on the great cholera epidemic of 1831 (Bosin, 2017). As a black woman—and from her position of liminality in both her American and Russian worlds—Prince renders a perspective on these events that is relatively uncommon to the traditional telling of history. Her account of her near-death experience in the 1824 flood, while personal, sheds light on the devastation and loss that this natural disaster represented and adds a black female voice to a trans national disaster that would have been covered otherwise by transcontinental white male voices from Europe and America:

I made my way through a long yard, over the bodies of men and beasts, and when opposite their gate I sunk; I made one grasp, and the earth gave away; I gasped again, and fortunately got hold of the leg of a horse, that had been drowned. I drew myself up, covered with mire, and made my way a little

further, when I was knocked down by striking against a boat, that had been washed up and left by the retiring waters; and as I had lost my lantern, I was obliged to grope my way as I could, and feeling along the walk, I at last found the door that I aimed at. (1995: p. 25)

With journalistic precision, she recounts the bloody suppression of the uprising in St. Petersburg after the unexpected death of Alexander 1st in 1826:

“... [T]hey [ordered] the cannons fired upon the mob...the scene cannot be described; the bodies of the killed and mangled were cast into the river, and the snow and ice were stained with blood of human victims; as they were obliged to drive the cannon to and fro in the midst of the crowd, the bones of those wounded, who might have been cured, were crushed...The scene was awful; all business was stopped...” (Prince, 1995: p. 25).

This passionate description of the scene is among the rare eye-witness accounts of the event written by an English-speaking woman. As a black woman relating and commenting upon these events, Prince created a narrative of unusual interest, particularly as she often noted the favorable treatment she and her husband received abroad, contrasting it with the racism she encountered at home. Prince also discussed her friendships with the Russian royal family and with the American abolitionists Lewis Tappan and women’s rights activist, Lucretia Mott. Returning to Boston in 1833, she met a minister from Jamaica, where slavery had been abolished and became determined to go where, as she said, “I hoped that I might aid, in some small degree, to raise up and encourage the emancipated inhabitants, and teach the young children to read and work ... and put their trust in the Saviour” (1995: p. 48). After trying unsuccessfully for some time to raise the money to go to Jamaica, she finally went in 1840 as a Christian missionary. In order to establish a “Free Labor School,” she writes, “I collected [money] in Boston and vicinity, New York and Philadelphia” [but] “was obliged to take fifty dollars from my own purse [to make up the required sum]” (1995: p. 60). Later, to establish a school for destitute children in Jamaica, Prince self-published the pamphlet *The West Indies: Being a Description of the Islands, Progress of Christianity, Education, and Liberty among the Colored Population Generally* in 1841.

Her pen became her armor in a war for justice when her narrative exposed conditions and circumstances in Jamaica immediately following emancipation, which she learns about first-hand from her conversations with ex-slaves themselves. The text provides a rare primary source of information on resettlement ships headed for Sierra Leone (1995: pp. 58-59) in one instance and ships of slaves headed for Texas in another where she writes, “Were I to tell all my eyes have seen among that people, it would not be credited” (1995: p. 61). Though Prince reports that all of her hard work for what became the Free Labor School in Kingston, Jamaica was sabotaged by corrupt co-workers, that she defined herself ultimately as a spiritual healer and entrepreneur is clear.

In her study, *Sentimental Confessions: Spiritual Narratives of Nineteenth-Century African American Women*, Moody (2003) observes that the narrative of Nancy Prince refuses to characterize black people according to the popular discursive portrayals, as pathologized victims.

Comparing *A Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince* (1850) with the narrative of the West Indian slave Mary Prince (1810), Moody suggests that, while both texts condemn slavery and chronicle experiences of blacks in the West Indies (Mary Prince as a slave and Nancy Prince as a missionary), Nancy Prince's autobiography "endorses self-reliance and depicts African Americans as figures of agency and accomplishment" (2003: p. 79). Frequently displaying an "embittered attitude toward Christianity" (2003: p. 91), Moody argues, "Prince gives us a travelogue that places greater emphasis on the secularity rather than the religiosity of her experience ..." (2003: p. 91). By the end of the narrative, Prince has reconciled herself to herself in her own terms. She has become much more experienced, authoritative, and self-assured and contributed an invaluable record of life as a free black woman in the nineteenth-century by leaving an extraordinary legacy of achievement at the communal, national and international levels.

4. Mary Seacole, "The Yaller Doctress" (1805-1881)

Florence Nightingale is a name with which many are probably familiar as the nurse who was famous during the 1800s for helping soldiers during the Crimean War. However, not many people know of her contemporary at that time, Mary Seacole, who also served on the front lines of the Crimean War as well. Unlike Florence Nightingale, however, Mary Seacole was a Jamaican woman of color whose narrative (*The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*, first published in 1857) respatializes Nightingale's experiences and the global event which catapulted Nightingale to fame. As a black woman, Seacole had little support for her endeavors and also received little recognition for her extraordinary contributions to the sick and injured on the front lines of that great war in which she played no small part. Her narrative is composed of 19 chapters and a conclusion and is a geo-literary remapping of the maritime interstices of Nancy Prince. Like Prince, Mary Grant Seacole significantly intervenes within and reconfigures discourses of war, medicine, and imperialism in the 19th century Atlantic world (Fish, 2004). Born of a Scottish father and an Afro-Caribbean mother, Mary Seacole carved out an identity for herself by appropriating two roles similar to those assumed by Prince: healer and entrepreneur, both liminal designations for black women in the 19th century. On these foundations her identity was shaped. She claims public space and redefinition by negotiating her marginal status, conveniently alternating her self-proclaimed identities as "the yellow doctress" of the Caribbean and Central America and the battle-field "Mother Seacole," healer of the Crimean War. Jamaica was at the time of her birth a slave society, and although technically "free," Seacole's family had few

civil rights, including the right to vote, hold public office and enter the professions.

However, the laws excluding women from the medical profession did not prevent Seacole's mother from practicing the traditional female profession of healer outside of the mainstream. She was well known in the town and taught, what Seacole called "Creole medicine," to her daughter; this included the treatment of wounds, diseases and other ailments. The Creole medicine which Seacole and her mother practiced was not only relegated to the margins by its association with Afro-Caribbean traditions but doubly denigrated because it was dispensed by women. As well as being a "doctress," Seacole's mother and then her daughter were also businesswomen who ran a hotel in Kingston frequented by British army officers. Seacole's liminal existence as a Jamaican creole, a hybrid identity between the white British overlords and the Jamaican slaves, seems to have fueled her passion for travel, for as soon as she was able, Seacole took off on an extensive journey around other islands of the Caribbean, visiting Cuba, Haiti, the Bahamas, and Central America, as well as mainland America and England ("Mary Seacole," BBC, 2008).

On these travels she expanded her knowledge to include European medical ideas which she added to her traditional repertoire. From her narrative account, as Sandra Gunning (2001) suggests, Seacole was consistently drawn to liminal spaces or "frontier sites" not frequented by women, especially women of color. Seacole negotiates the politics of white space and makes consciousness use of the ideological fissures that promoted her own economic aims. One of the first key points of information that she shares with the reader is how she became a "doctress," as she was called in her day, following in her mother's radical footsteps:

My mother kept a boardinghouse in Kingston, and was, like very many of the Creole women, an admirable doctress; in high repute with the officers of both services, and their wives, who were from time to time stationed at Kingston. It was very natural that I should inherit her tastes; and so I had from early youth a yearning for medical knowledge and practice which has never deserted me. When I was a very young child I was taken by an old lady, who brought me up in her household among her own grandchildren, and who could scarcely have shown me more kindness had I been one of them; indeed, I was so spoiled by my kind patroness that, but for being frequently with my mother, I might very likely have grown up idle and useless. But I saw so much of her, and of her patients, that the ambition to become a doctress early took firm root in my mind; and I was very young when I began to make use of the little knowledge I had acquired from watching my mother, upon a great sufferer—my doll (1990: pp. 1-6).

Seacole reports growing up in a loving environment where she was well-educated. She married Edward Seacole in 1836, but her husband died some months after their wedding closely followed by the death of her mother, all of which she recounts in the first few pages of the narrative. The remainder of the

text is devoted to her travels, healing and entrepreneurial activities in the Caribbean, Central America, and Russia.

The death of Edward Seacole and Mary's mother left her to fend for herself. This she did admirably by practicing the healing arts learned from her mother and creating medicinal remedies for all sorts of ailments. She took over her mother's boarding house and continued her work. Some of Seacole's customers were military doctors, she noted, from whose medical knowledge she benefitted. What she ultimately masters is a method of treating Cholera, the dreaded disease which killed hundreds of thousands in various parts of the world during the 19th century. While Seacole was in Panama, where she went to help set up a business with her brother, there was an outbreak of Cholera. Here, she was given the label, "the yellow doctress" by the local population who highly respected her because of her tireless efforts to treat the Cholera victims. Writing about this experience, she gives her assessment of the causes of the disease and the extraordinary autopsy she performed in order to better understand how to treat it:

... [They] never stirred a finger to clean out their close, reeking huts, or rid the damp streets of the rotting accumulation of months. I think their chief reliance was on "the yellow woman from Jamaica with the cholera medicine." Nor was this surprising; for the Spanish doctor, who was sent for from Panama, became nervous and frightened at the horrors around him, and the people soon saw that he was not familiar with the terrible disease he was called upon to do battle with, and preferred trusting to one who was. It may seem strange, but it is a fact, that I thought more of that little child than I did of the men who were struggling for their lives, and prayed very earnestly and solemnly to God to spare it. But it did not please Him to grant my prayer, and towards morning the wee spirit left this sinful world for the home above it had so lately left, and what was mortal of the little infant lay dead in my arms. Then it was that I began to think—how the idea first arose in my mind I can hardly say—that, if it were possible to take this little child and examine it, I should learn more of the terrible disease which was sparing neither young nor old, and should know better how to do battle with it. I was not afraid to use my baby patient thus. I knew its fled spirit would not reproach me, for I had done all I could for it in life – had shed tears over it, and prayed for it. (1990: p. 44)

If we consider the regional.... affiliations encompassed by Seacole's narrative, then Panama marks the geographical and social intersection of Native American, Anglo-American, African, and Latin American nationalities—that is, the complex political life of the American side of Paul Gilroy's black Atlantic, including but also extending beyond the British Caribbean empire, including other forms of imperialism and local contests for autonomy. This places Seacole in the position of participant-observer in a politico-economic drama which will ultimately draw the lines of U.S. and British imperialism in the Caribbean and Central American regions to the present day.

Her narrative also shows her sympathy for American slaves and exploited laborers engaged in building the canal. She does not fail to take the Americans to task for their racism, expressed even as they toast her for the outstanding work she did relative to the Cholera. She attempts to capture the speech as well as the tone of this racism:

“Well, gentlemen, I expect you’ll all support me in a drinking of this toast that I du —. Aunty Seacole, gentlemen; I give you, Aunty Seacole —. We can’t du less for her, after what she’s done for us —, when the cholera was among us, gentlemen —, not many months ago —. So, I say, God bless the best yaller woman He ever made —, from Jamaica...I expect there are only tu things we’re vexed for —; and the first is, that she ain’t one of us —, a citizen of the great United States —; and the other thing is, gentlemen —, that Providence made her a yaller woman. I calculate, gentlemen, you’re all as vexed as I am that she’s not wholly white —, but I du reckon on your re-joicing with me that she’s so many shades removed from being entirely black —; and I guess, if we could bleach her by any means we would —, and thus make her as acceptable in any company as she deserves to be —. Gentlemen, I give you Aunty Seacole!” (1990: p. 46)

Angered and unimpressed, Seacole replies:

“Gentlemen, I return you my best thanks for your kindness in drinking my health. As for what I have done in Cruces, Providence evidently made me to be useful, and I can’t help it. But, I must say, that I don’t altogether appreciate your friend’s kind wishes with respect to my complexion. ... and as to his offer of blessing [for] me, I should, even if it were practicable, decline it without any thanks. As to the society which the process might gain me admission into, all I can say is, that, judging from the specimens I have met with here and elsewhere, I don’t think that I shall lose much by being excluded from it. So, gentlemen, I drink to you and the general reformation of American manners.” (1990: p. 46)

Seacole is careful here to invert perceived white male privilege by a careful rendering of speech which consigns the American soldier to an inferior class and educational status. Later, Seacole leaves Panama and returns to Jamaica in time to fight another cholera epidemic, during which time she learns of the dire situation of the British in the Crimea.

In 1854 as the Crimean War was escalating, Seacole heard about Florence Nightingale’s financing and organizing Britain’s first corps of trained nurses. She organized her supplies and travelled to London to see how she could help, perceiving the need for her skill in treating Cholera, Yellow Fever, typhoid and other disastrous illnesses. However, she was refused by everyone and the British War Office never even gave her an interview. Undaunted by the experience, though, Seacole decided to travel to the Crimea and build her own hospital with her own funding:

Heaven knows it was visionary enough! I had no friends who would help in such a project... who would understand why I desired to go, and what I desired to do when I got there. My funds, although they might, carefully husbanded, carry me over the three thousand miles, and land me at Balaclava, would not support me there long; while to persuade the public that an unknown Creole woman would be useful to their army before Sebastopol was too improbable an achievement to be thought of for an instant ... (1990: p. 73)

She was well aware of the discrimination she might face, as well as potential other dangers, but despite it all, she decided to go to the Crimea as a sutler:

Need I be ashamed to confess that I shared in the general enthusiasm, and longed more than ever to carry my busy (and the reader will not hesitate to add experienced) fingers where the sword or bullet had been busiest, and pestilence most rife. I had seen much of sorrow and death elsewhere, but that had never daunted me; and if I could feel happy binding up the wounds of quarrelsome Americans and treacherous Spaniards, what delight should I not experience if I could be useful to my own...[that is the British]... suffering for a cause it was so glorious to fight... for!...I made up my mind that if the army wanted nurses, they would be glad of me, and with all the ardour of my nature, which ever carried me where inclination prompted, I decided that I *would* go to the Crimea; and go I did, as all the world knows. (1990: p. 75)

When Seacole arrived there in 1856, she tried again to join the Nightingale nurses but was refused acceptance. Constraints of race and class became a formidable barrier to sisterly cooperation in this case, and so she established the British Hotel near Balaclava using her own money. Seacole went regularly to nurse the wounded on the front lines of the battlefield dispensing medicine, meals and other supplies. When she used up all her savings to obtain necessities, she sold medicines and meals to the soldiers to keep going.

The Crimea, like Panama, can be seen as examples of Turner's Liminal places or "third spaces." And the work of healing, as well, represents a marginal activity (Victor Turner). Such third spaces can range from borders, to no man's land and disputed territories, to crossroads, spaces which people pass through but do not live. Not only did she aid wounded British soldiers, but French and Turkish soldiers as well. At Scutari and Sebastopol, she becomes "Mother Seacole" no longer "the yaller doctress" of Panama and Jamaica. This new identity, as her narrative attests, is a bold assertion of self-affirmation, revealing her attainment of agency along with this geographical and literary remapping of her identity. She writes in the chapter, "My Work in the Crimea":

I HOPE the reader will give me credit for the assertion that I am about to make, viz., that I enter upon the particulars of this chapter with great reluctance; but I cannot omit them, for the simple reason that they strengthen

my one and only claim to interest the public, viz., my services to the brave British army in the Crimea....I can follow a course which will not only render it unnecessary for me to sound my own trumpet, but will be more satisfactory to the reader. I can put on record the written opinions of those who had ample means of judging and ascertaining how I fulfilled the great object which I had in view in leaving England for the Crimea; and before I do so, I must solicit my readers' attention to the position I held in the camp as doctress, nurse, and "mother" (1990: p. 76)

Even though she was a shrewd business woman with a hotel and sutler business, she focuses the reader's attention to her charitable work as a healer on the battlefield:

My acquaintance with it began very shortly after I had reached Balaclava. The very first day that I approached the wharf, a party of sick and wounded had just arrived. Here was work for me, I felt sure. With so many patients, the doctors must be glad of all the hands they could get. Indeed, so strong was the old impulse within me, that I waited for no permission, but seeing a poor artilleryman stretched upon a pallet, groaning heavily, I ran up to him at once, and eased the stiff dressings... Then his hand touched mine, and rested there, and I heard him mutter indistinctly, as though the discovery had arrested his wandering senses "Ha! This is surely a woman's hand." I couldn't say much, but I tried to whisper something about hope and trust in God; but all the while I think his thoughts were running on this strange discovery. Perhaps I had brought to his poor mind memories of his home, and the loving ones there, who would ask no greater favour than the privilege of helping him thus; for he continued to hold my hand in his feeble grasp, and whisper "God bless you, *woman*—whoever you are, God bless you!"—over and over again. (1990: p. 78)

Seacole's experiences were vastly different from those of the majority of black women in the Atlantic world during the time period. In 1850 the infamous Compromise of the same year established a Fugitive Slave Law in the United States giving greater power to federal authorities in exchange for admission of California to the union as a free state. Black female slaves did not have the opportunity to learn to read and write and thus remained silent witnesses in their own narratives. With few exceptions like Harriet Jacobs, most of Nancy Gardner Prince's American contemporaries did not achieve literary agency. In Jamaica, as in other Caribbean colonies in the early to mid 19th century, most black women were enslaved. Enslaved women of the U.S. as well as Jamaica suffered sexual abuse at the hands of their white masters, overseers, or relatives and friends of their white owners (Lowenberg & Bogin, 1977).

Mary Seacole, however, transgressed the limits set for most of her kind. Her travel represents a clear subversion of her destined place in the society. Moreover, she left her healing touch on many areas affected by epidemics such as cholera and yellow fever which few medical professionals of the time could even at-

tempt to cure. In her narrative, she tells us that through her common sense approach and gentle herbal remedies she was able to recover more people than the scientifically trained medical men. Hygiene, sanitation, warmth, and isolation as well as nourishing food were at the basis of her treatments, together with herbs, poultices, and mustard plasters. She wrote the following near the end of the narrative, she speaks of the potential contentious impact of her narrative while embracing the power of her voice as a black woman in transatlantic space:

In the last three chapters, I have attempted, without any consideration of dates, to give my readers some idea of my life in the Crimea. I am fully aware that I have jumbled up events strangely, talking in the same page, and even sentence, of events which occurred at different times; but I have three excuses to offer for my unhistorical inexactness. In the first place, my memory is far from trustworthy, and I kept no written diary; in the second place, the reader must have had more than enough of journals and chronicles of Crimean life, and I am only the historian of Spring Hill; and in the third place, unless I am allowed to tell the story of my life in my own way, I cannot tell it at all. (1990: p. 89)

The Crimean War offered a fertile ground for her talents, but Mary Seacole faced racism in her attempt to join the official group of nurses under the supervision of Florence Nightingale. In contrast to Florence Nightingale's outstanding administrative and statistical achievements, Mary Seacole's contribution was very much at the forefront of hands on healing out on the field of combat and at the docks among the wounded and sick. Because of her extraordinary work, Mary Seacole was awarded medals from Britain, Turkey and France in commemoration of her work with the soldiers of all nationalities. However, not until 1954 (the anniversary of the outbreak of the Crimean War) was her name resurrected by the Jamaican Nurses Association who wished to name their proposed headquarters in Kingston 'Mary Seacole House' (Robinson, 2006: p. 199). Finally, an exhibition called "The Wonderful Mrs. Seacole" went on display at the Florence Nightingale Museum in London in 2007. The occasion marked not only the 200th anniversary of the British suppression of the transatlantic slave trade, but it was also the 150th anniversary of the publication of Mary Seacole's autobiographical narrative. Seacole's narrative confirms that she, like Nancy Prince, was a successful negotiator of ambiguities and interstices, of a subversive movement from within the marginal spaces constructed for women like her into the international arena of a tumultuous century. As Sandra Pouchet Paquet (1992) notes, "Mary Seacole's narrative celebrates her adventures and underscores her rejection of domesticity as restricting and frustrating" (1992: p. 651). Her risk-taking travel exploits, knowledge of business, herbal medicine and hands-on nursing are directly relevant to society today.

5. Conclusion

Bell Hooks (1990) argues that a definite distinction must be made "between that

marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance—as locations of deficit radical openness and possibility” (Hooks, 1990: p. 208) because, she suggests, it is a “site of resistance” being “continually formed in that segregated culture of opposition that is [blacks’] critical response to domination” (Hooks, 1990: p. 208). Prince and Seacole seized radical possibility; they made “radical creative space which affirmed and sustained [their] subjectivity” (Hooks, 1990: p. 209) and gave them “a new location from which to articulate [their] sense of the world” (Hooks, 1990: p. 209). Thus, despite the fact that the travel of these women was challenging without a doubt, their experiences can hardly be seen as locations of deficient but instead as what Bell Hooks sees as sites of radical possibility and spaces of resistance. As Haywood (2003) points out, “they were already defying accepted definitions of female behavior by choosing not to stay home in pre-determined spaces and roles ... They were traveling, which itself constituted a potential breach of the public/private dichotomy, as traveling was an activity generally preserved for men”. As blacks traveling during the height of slavery and Jim Crow Segregation, they violated other social practices and faced the possibilities of immobility and enslavement or servitude (Haywood, 2003: pp. 55-56).

Prince and Seacole’s legacies directly confront racist/sexist myths about power and leadership that have evolved from patriarchal, Eurocentric definitions of these terms. Their specific “ethic of caring and personal accountability” (Collins, 1990: pp. 215-216) as articulated in their travel narratives shaped the nature of their lives, their identities and the work that they did in intruding a black female voice into the imperial narrative of the Atlantic world. Cooper (1990) asked in *A Voice from the South* who would capture the voice and achievements of black women. One could say that Prince and Seacole, for certain, knew that the task was one for the women themselves. Their narratives are arguably examples of activism and writing expanding the geography of the African Diaspora by renegotiating both the physical & discursive spaces to which 19th century black women were consigned.

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