

Mrs. Seacole's Wonderful Adventures in Many Lands and the Consciousness of Transit



LIZABETH PARAVISINI-GEBERT

Mary Seacole was a Jamaican nurse and a heroine of the Crimean War. A contemporary of Florence Nightingale, whose fame overshadows her, she was honoured with a Blue Plaque at her home, 157, George St. London W1 in 1985. The property has since been demolished but English Heritage has rescued the Blue Plaque and is seeking another building associated with Mary to re-home it.

“*P*oor Mary Seacole,” one might be tempted to conclude when encountering this English Heritage Foundation press release:¹ still overshadowed by her rival Nightingale, her former home demolished to build a block of flats, the Blue Plaque that confirmed her “place” as a noteworthy player in a painful chapter of English history adrift in search of a new “home.” The irony of this announcement is that it fits only too well with common interpretations of Mary Seacole’s life and career, and of the autobiographical book through which she urged her claim to recognition as a “heroine” of the Crimean War, *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*, published in England in 1857.² In this memoir, Seacole argues her case for an acknowledgment of her heroic deeds in the Crimea precisely by building her narrative upon her failed efforts to have her journey endorsed by the English³ establishment (including the rejection of her services as an experienced nurse by Nightingale’s group) and by elaborating on the loss of her “home” in the Crimea (her “British Hotel”) when hostilities had ceased abruptly (an event that left her penniless and in need to write her “claim” in order to recover her fortunes). With these heavy cues glaring at readers from her text, writings about Seacole have focused, not surprisingly, on her marginalization as a Jamaican of

mixed ancestry, a “yellow woman” from the lower middle class, and a colonial. Her story, however, is open to a different reading—one that traces the strategies through which Mrs. Seacole, writing against that presumed marginalization, carves a space for herself in English history and literature through her actions in the Crimea, a site that stands for “England” during the Crimean War (October 1853 to February 1856). As Mrs. Seacole’s claim to a place in British history was established in the Crimea, no spot would be more adequate for the Blue Plaque that marks her presence in England than the ruins of the British Hotel in Spring Hill, in the outskirts of Sebastopol.

The Mrs. Seacole of *The Wonderful Adventures . . . in Many Lands*, was born Mary Grant in 1805 in Kingston, Jamaica. The daughter of a father whose only known trait was his having been a white Scottish officer, and a mother who was a colored herbalist or “doctress,” Mary grew up in her native Kingston training as a healer under the tutelage of her mother, who also ran a small boarding-house. As members of the Jamaican urban entrepreneurial lower-middle class, Mary and her mother occupied a place of relatively high status in the colonial social hierarchy, a position enhanced by their connections to British army and navy officers, whose families frequently lodged with the Grants, to whose talents they often owed their speedy recoveries from injuries and tropical diseases. Mrs. Seacole would claim the ties of friendship stemming from these associations in Jamaica as providing the initial impetus for her desire to join the English forces in the Crimea when war broke out in the latter months of 1853.

Mrs. Seacole’s career, after an early widowhood, was built upon those skills she had learned from her mother—nursing, innkeeping, and “sutling.” As a sutler, she traveled extensively throughout the Caribbean, buying and selling a variety of goods. Like her mother before her, she ran a boardinghouse and mess hall in Kingston. In her mid-forties, and at the behest of her brother, she joined him in Cruces, Panama, where she ran another hostelry and prospected for gold. From 1855 to 1857 she made her mark as a hotelier and sutler in the Crimea, before returning bankrupt to England after the end of the war and writing her memoirs as a way of restoring her muddled finances.

Critical explorations of Mrs. Seacole’s career and writings have focused, not unsurprisingly, on the ways in which her complex racial, ethnic, and proto-national identities define and redefine themselves through countless encounters with others during her travels. Sandra Pouchet Paquet, for example, in one of the earliest critical assessments of the text after its reissue in 1988 through the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers, centers her analysis on the ways in which Seacole “conceptualizes herself as the rootless traveler who comes home to the value-defining space she has made for herself in service to the British military.” Seacole, Paquet argues, “devalues significant spheres of her Jamaican identity to project herself, ultimately, as the lackey of male privilege and Empire.”⁴ Bernard McKenna, likewise, sees the text as embodying “the contradictions of colonial expansion.” Mrs. Seacole’s text, in McKenna’s assessment, “privileges the position of the white English reader in

her attempt to write for an English audience” and consequently “distance[s] herself from black colored skin.”⁵ Amy Robinson, in an effort to “restore Seacole’s pivotal role in the construction of a feminist Afro-Caribbean literary history,” reads the autobiography “as a narrative that not only seeks to communicate a ‘self’ but also to negotiate the very social conditions which silence and marginalize a Black female colonial subject.”⁶ Ivette Romero-Cesareo, reading against the grain, sees Seacole’s “underlying agenda” as that of denouncing “the suffering of people because of their color.”⁷

Perhaps a more intriguing question to be considered—since what we know of Mrs. Seacole’s identity is constructed through her writing—is in what ways the textual nature of her identity is bound with a “discursive image of the self”⁸ built not exclusively upon her consciousness of transit across geographies of space, race, class, and gender but through the conscious elaboration of a place of arrival. She writes *in* England and in many ways *for* England, but with the specific purpose of validating the ways in which she has earned a space very much her own—and of being recompensed accordingly. Her (re)construction of identity—I prefer to call it a reconstruction as she writes of something already elaborated in the past—is built upon a skillful and strategic recollection of “a multiple, shifting and often self-contradicting identity, a subject that is not divided in, but rather at odds with, language; an identity made up of heterogeneous and heteronomous representations of gender, race, and class and often indeed across languages and cultures; an identity that one decides to reclaim from a history of multiple assimilations and that one insists upon as strategy.”⁹

What I would like to argue is, in short, that Seacole’s text is a seamlessly and consciously articulated textual reconstruction of how her transit through the geographies of her varied career culminates in an identity—that of Mother Seacole, heroine of the Crimea—that she wishes to privilege as a signifying “site.” I am quite ready to grant Mrs. Seacole her little vanities and the transparency of some of her rhetorical machinations as evidence of this very specific intent. A reading of *The Wonderful Adventures* as a validation of her rightfully earned position in English society (and eventually history) through her actions in the Crimea offers a perspective that gives specific coherence to her narrative. As she makes clear in the text, “I shall make no excuse to my readers for giving them a pretty full history of my struggles to become a Crimean heroine!”¹⁰

Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift, in their essay “Mapping the Subject,” speak of how “ideas of movement and travel are bound up with a sense of something around the corner, a new image-concept that will produce a new subject position or a new subjectivity.” They argue, moreover, that “forging such an image-concept requires the recognition of new spatialities.”¹¹ I would contend, in the case of Mrs. Seacole, that the text is less a travel narrative, as it is usually classified, than it is the tale of how the varied subjectivities she has articulated through her travels have led her to a consolidation of a persona constructed in and through these spatialities, a persona she seeks to crystallize through her text.

What I am particularly interested in is in how she seeks to map herself in and through England, particularly in and through London, although those are never places where she remains continuously for too long. This is why the irony of the Blue Plaque reverberates with my reading of *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*; because although Seacole writes very little, almost nothing, about her life in England, England becomes the site where her presence—her Blue Plaque, so to speak—ultimately has to be homed.

Seacole, although self-identified as a Jamaican Creole, becomes “English” in the Crimea. Ironically, since her narrative is built upon a careful manipulation of ironies, Seacole can become a significant presence in England precisely because she is somewhere else. She assumes her place in a British society—and history—from which she is initially rejected, by finding in the Crimea a substitute for “England,” a war zone where the expected barriers to someone of her class, race, and colonial origins can be temporarily lifted.

There is indeed little actually written about England itself in *The Wonderful Adventures*. What little there is is worth examining, however, because it centers on two highly dramatic scenes. Of Seacole’s first visit to England, undertaken when she was a very young woman, she writes no more than half a page to cover a year’s residence in London. The stay is punctuated by an oft-cited incident through which Seacole conveys her impressions of English racism: walking in London, the lighter-skinned Seacole and a dark-skinned companion were subjected to what she terms the “rude wit” of London street-boys. The incident, often cited as an example of English prejudices at work, is but a fleeting moment in a stay that lasted “about a year,” and the reader is left wondering if this is meant as a distillation of her experiences in England. This stay led to a second visit shortly thereafter in which she brought “a large stock of West Indian preserves and pickles for sale.” That stay lasted for two years, but no description is offered.

The remaining incidents of Seacole’s life in England revolve around her attempts, in 1854, to join the nurses being sent to the Crimea to staff the hospital at Scutari, Turkey, or, failing that, to obtain some form of official sponsorship for her own independent expedition. One episode in this struggle stands out as significant because it dramatizes Seacole’s predicament by echoing the theme of racial prejudice that punctuated her earlier recollection of life in London. In this episode, Seacole, having failed in her last-ditch effort to receive funding from the Crimean fund to travel to the camp, finds herself “one cold evening” standing “in the twilight, which was fast deepening into wintry night,” looking back “upon the ruins of my last castle in the air”:

Doubts and suspicions arose in my heart for the first and last time, thank Heaven. Was it possible that [the] American prejudices against colour [that she had found so offensive in her encounters with Americans in Panama] had some root here? Did these ladies shrink from accepting my aid because my blood flowed beneath a somewhat duskier skin than theirs?¹²

The simulated naiveté of the question, in all its calculated poignancy, betrays its true denunciatory intent. Seacole, while in Panama, had no qualms in responding with sarcastic bite to the American who, in toasting her role in combating an epidemic of yellow fever in Cruces, wished her skin could be bleached. As that incident proved, she is not an unsophisticated reader of cultural “texts.” The rhetorical nature of the question she poses in the English episode only serves as a fairly transparent strategy to address the racism she identifies with life in London throughout her narrative while evading a direct accusation that would have alienated potential readers. Rhetorically, therefore, through this passage in her text, Seacole situates herself geographically in a highly dramatic—almost melodramatic—setting through which she can perform the depths of despair into which the mere possibility of her having to acknowledge racism in the society where she expects to find readers for her book has thrown her. The performance of the despair occasioned by the *doubt* allows her nonetheless to instill in the minds of her readers the destructive power of racism.

Tears streamed down my foolish cheeks, as I stood in the fast thinning streets; tears of grief that any should doubt my motives—that Heaven should deny me the opportunity that I sought. Then I stood still, and looking upward through and through the dark clouds that shadowed London, prayed aloud for help. I dare say that I was a strange sight to the few passers-by, who hastened homeward through the gloom and mist of that wintry night. I dare say those who read these pages will wonder at me as much as they who saw me did; but you must all remember that I am one of an impulsive people, and find it hard to put that restraint upon my feelings which to you is so easy and natural.¹³

The passage interests me, above all, for its theatricality, and for the ways in which it appears to mask Seacole’s true meaning while simultaneously underscoring it. The passage, which opens with the description of the frosty twilight (as frosty as the reception she has received from the “ladies”), ends with a reminder that she comes from an “impulsive people,” that is, that she is a Jamaican, as warm-hearted as her “natural” climate. It is as a colored Jamaican woman, then, that we must picture her standing in the cold, “thinning” streets with passers-by who stare but do not stop, her eyes turned to the Heaven that has denied her the opportunity she sought—a gentle hint that it wasn’t Heaven, but the (racist?) “ladies” who destroyed her “castle in the air.” (More about the “ladies” later.) It is as a clever manipulation of rhetoric that we must read this passage, one that leaves no doubt as to Seacole’s skill in gauging her readers’ willingness to accept a substantially simplistic reading of the reasons for her rejection. She effectively uses melodrama—a structure familiar to contemporary readers and viewers of plays—as the means of securing identification with her audience and turning her story into a drama of good and evil featuring an ambiguous, hybrid heroine.

This singular melodramatic mapping of her situation in London prior to

her leaving for the Crimea helps to explain to readers Seacole's *need* to leave England without official sanction. "If the authorities had allowed me, I would willingly have given them my services as a nurse; but as they declined them, should I not open an hotel for invalids in the Crimea in my own way?"¹⁴ She trusts to the soldiers, to "those there who had known me in Jamaica," to give her a welcome different than that of the "ladies."

Seacole's anxieties about establishing the purity of her motives is linked to her relative position vis-à-vis the "ladies" who have rejected her services. For "ladies" we must read primarily Florence Nightingale and her group, as the recruitment of nurses to tend to the wounded in the Crimea was in their hands. Acceptance by Nightingale would have meant not only that her expenses would have been covered by the Crimean Fund—Mrs. Seacole was always practical—but also that she would have left for the war front covered by the mantle of respectability and de facto heroism that the Nightingale group stood for. Rejected by them, Seacole goes to the Crimea as a "sutler," an entrepreneur who finances her ministering-angel functions through the more disreputable occupation of hotelier, cook, caterer, supplier of necessities and luxuries. Without official sanction and funds, her nursing services and medicines must be remunerated by the soldiers themselves. Her direct involvement in these transactions compromises her potential claim to the status of "lady." Rejection is exclusion from a particular "site" of respectability—an equality with the "ladies"—from which the likes of Seacole were barred. Her striving for this site reveals the extent of her refreshing and potentially subversive ambition; her use of race as the most likely explanation for an exclusion that she knew stemmed from more complex motives indicates her awareness that in Victorian society racial identity subsumed all other forms of identity (of class, culture, healing practices, religious beliefs).

Thus Florence Nightingale enters Seacole's text both as a "real" presence and as a "site" that Seacole cannot inhabit. Seacole's rhetorical questions as to the reasons for her exclusion had indeed been answered earlier in the text: she had commented, when describing the results of her meeting with Nightingale's deputy in England, that she had "read in her face the fact, that had there been a vacancy, I should not have been chosen to fill it."¹⁵ As a result, Seacole writes her text, in part, against the backdrop of that rejection. *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*, through its articulation of its author's impressive credentials as a healer and through the portrait it offers of Mrs. Seacole as a committed humanitarian, seeks to make the site represented by Nightingale a less meaningful, less central space, one perhaps even diminished by suspicions of negative attitudes toward race. Where Nightingale goes, Seacole strives to overtake her: Nightingale goes to her hospital in Scutari; Seacole establishes her supply store and medical unit at Spring Hill, just five miles from the action at Sebastopol. Nightingale is reputed to be efficient but cold toward her patients, dismaying wounded officers by walking past their beds without a word; Seacole rushes into the battlefield, bandages, medicines, and food at hand, tending to the casualties on the field at great personal risk and, reputedly, with great sym-

pathy and personal warmth. Soldiers *prefer* to be tended by Seacole, the text assures us, because her medicines are more effective, her healing touch surer, the food she offers convalescent soldiers more nourishing, her understanding of their needs and predicaments greater and more nuanced. And since Nightingale, in the Crimea, continues to occupy her "site" as representative of England, Seacole must endeavor to gain a similar "space" of "fame" through publicizing her deeds—through others or through her own writings if necessary. Seacole, therefore, cleverly weaves Nightingale into her text, creating a mirror image that in many ways subverts Nightingale and allows Seacole, if not to displace Nightingale (whose career in England reverberates beyond the Crimean War), at least to share her Crimean space.

Herself an avid reader of newspapers and reports, Seacole knew only too well that Nightingale, the "Lady with the Lamp," had become the most potent symbol of the horrors of the Crimea in the eyes of the English reading public. In terms of class and access to official channels of support, the two women could not have been more different—contrasting versions of light and shade. Nightingale, highly educated and well connected, and already well known for her efforts to reform (to professionalize, that is) the occupation of nursing, had been approached by the then minister of war, Sidney Herbert, to take charge of selecting, training, and supervising female nurses for the military hospital at Scutari. Seacole, straight from Panama and unknown and unconnected in London, had little chance of finding official support for her efforts, except through Nightingale's group. But Seacole would not have been seen by the "ladies" of that group as a suitable candidate. Hugh Small, the author of a biography of Nightingale, *Florence Nightingale: Avenging Angel*, argues in her defense that Seacole did not fit the mold, "not just in the colour of her skin, but in her background and experience."¹⁶ As he explained to Sue Carpenter, "They were looking either for ladies, who would be in charge, or paid skivvies. Mary Seacole would have fitted badly into this set-up. She was over-qualified and would have had strong ideas about what she wanted to do."¹⁷

Seacole, neither a lady to be put in charge nor so low in the class hierarchy as to be insulted by an offer of work as one of the skivvies, was out of the running. It is her indeterminate "place," her unclassifiableness as a light-skinned Jamaican Creole with excellent nursing skills, that bars her from the position she wishes to occupy. Seacole, seemingly uncontainable in her persistence and gumption, and superior in her nursing experience and training to Nightingale, could very easily have been perceived as a threat. It is easy, then, to subsume her complexity under her racial identity.

It may also have been preconceived notions about the sexuality of women in her situation—colored, ambiguous in terms of class, somewhat flashy in dress, and a little vain—that barred her from acceptance. Seacole, if we are to judge by her own descriptions of her wardrobe and toilette, was something of a flamboyant dresser, preferring clothing in conspicuously bright colors—red and yellow were favorites—and favoring hats with flowing red ribbons, even in the

battlefields of the Crimea.¹⁸ Her view of herself as preferred by the men over Nightingale had its touch of sexual vanity.

Seacole, once recovered from the dejection occasioned by her doubts about the motives behind her rejection by the “ladies,” established a firm, Seacole and Day, in partnership with an old friend of her husband’s, placed an advertisement in newspapers announcing her imminent departure for the Crimea with the intent of setting up a mess hall and convalescent home, and set sail for Balacava in February 1855. Having chosen a location near the front, she built her “British Hotel”—a hybrid establishment that combined a dispensary for herbal medicines and medical supplies, some rooms for convalescent officers (many of them old acquaintances from Jamaica), a shop that sold provisions (and was by all reports excellently stocked with linen, game and fowl, eggs and fish, vegetables, and sundry items like tobacco and alcohol), and a catering service that provided meals for soldiers going to the trenches as well as for officers’ parties and other celebrations. The comforts, even luxuries, provided by the British Hotel, combined with Seacole’s unquestioned popularity with the men for her medical skill, effective remedies, motherly care, and sincere sympathy for the sick and wounded, made her establishment a unique refuge for soldiers fighting in wretched conditions in a war that had taken a severe toll on the British army. (The war, fought between the Russians on one side and the British, French, and Ottoman Turkish, with the aid of the Sardinia-Piedmont army on the other, eventually took a toll of a quarter of a million lives, many of them lost as a result of disease and malnourishment. Of the twenty thousand British soldiers dead during the campaign, three thousand were said to have died in the battlefield, while the remaining reportedly died of various illnesses, chiefly dysentery. The efficacy of Seacole’s remedy for the latter was legendary.) Seacole’s description of her first meeting with Nightingale in Scutari—she was later to encounter her frequently in Balacava, but those meetings are not described in the autobiography—underscores her being received by the Mrs. B. who had rejected her in London with “more surprise than she could politely show” and being greeted by Nightingale herself with a curt “What do you want, Mrs. Seacole,” followed by a gentler “—anything that we can do for you?” Seacole’s lavish praise of Nightingale as “the Englishwoman whose name shall never die, but sound like music on the lips of British men until the hour of doom” is framed between the cold reception of her staff described just before and the description of how, having been given a bed for the night in the washerwomen’s quarters, Seacole spends an agreeable evening in warm camaraderie with the servants.¹⁹ The framing scenes follow Seacole’s description of the conditions she found at the Scutari hospital, which lead her to rejoice in the excellence of her own arrangements:

One thought never left my mind as I walked through the fearful miles of suffering in that great hospital. If it is so here, what must it not be at the scene of the war—on the spot where the poor fellows are stricken down by pestilence or Russian bullets, and days and nights of agony must be passed before a woman’s hand can dress their wounds. And I

felt happy in the conviction that *I must* be useful three or four days nearer to their pressing wants than this.²⁰

Seacole’s veiled misgivings about the Scutari barracks hospital and her repeated claim in *The Wonderful Adventures* that the sick and wounded soldiers with whom she came in contact in the Crimea expressed horror at the thought of being sent there is supported by recent research into the unsanitary conditions and epidemic outbreaks at the site. In his book on Nightingale, Hugh Small argues that Nightingale’s lack of nursing training and extremely limited experience in hospital administration (which consisted of having run a nursing home for governesses for a year) left her sadly unprepared to manage an overcrowded field hospital with extremely poor sanitary conditions built over germ-ridden blocked drains. The Scutari hospital was, from Small’s description, a death camp from which three out of eight patients never came out alive. During Nightingale’s first winter in charge of the hospital (1854–1855) as many as five thousand soldiers died under her care, many of them from dysentery or fevers caught in the hospital because of bad hygiene. The death rate, much higher than at any hospital in the front, lessened only when inspectors recommended improvements in hygienic conditions the following year. Hugh Small claims that upon her return to England, Nightingale’s realization of her unwitting role in the death of so many caused the nervous breakdown that resulted in her spending the next eleven years in bed and left her an invalid for the rest of her life.

It is in the context of these conditions at Scutari, where Seacole had toured extensively, that she makes her claim that

before long I found myself surrounded with patients of my own. . . . In the first place, the men (I am speaking of the “ranks” now) had a very serious objection to going to the hospital for any but urgent reasons . . . and in the second place, they could and did get at my store sick-comforts and nourishing food, which the heads of the medical staff find it difficult to procure. These reasons, with the additional one that I was very familiar with the diseases which they suffered most from, and successful in their treatment (I say this in no spirit of vanity), were quite sufficient to account for the numbers who came daily to the British Hotel for medical treatment.²¹

Seacole’s reading of the contempt with which she was regarded by Nightingale and her group was not without its foundation. In a letter written by Nightingale to her brother-in-law, Sir Henry Verney, a member of Parliament, in 1870, she addresses her opinion of Mrs. Seacole in terms that underscore the gap in understanding between these women vying for recognition as heroines of the Crimean War. The letter, discovered by Nightingale’s biographer Hugh Small, was apparently in response to a request for a reference from Sir Harry, who had been recruiting nurses to work in field hospitals during the Franco-Prussian War, and to whom Mrs. Seacole must have applied. It bore an instruction at the top to “Burn” and reads as follows:

[Mrs. Seacole] kept—I will not call it a “bad house”—but something not very unlike it. . . . She was very kind to the men and, what is more, to the Officers, and did some good, and made many drunk.

I had the greatest difficulty in repelling Mrs Seacole’s advances, and in preventing association between her and my nurses (absolutely out of the question). . . . Anyone who employs Mrs Seacole will introduce much kindness—also much drunkenness and improper conduct.²²

In defense of Nightingale, Small pleads justifications other than race that would have led to her rejection of Seacole’s contributions: “At the time, nursing was far from being a respectable occupation—Seacole’s claim of extensive experience was likely to be misread in the British context—and sexual harassment of nurses by soldiers was common.”²³ Nightingale, whose primary wish was to reform military hospitals and introduce care by professionally trained middle-class nurses of excellent breeding and repute, would have seen in Seacole an unlikely example of her ideal nurse. Seacole, trained in non-Western, or at best syncretized, healing traditions, would have further alienated public opinion from Nightingale’s efforts.

Cheryl Fish has argued that Seacole’s displacement from the centrality of social and historical space as defined by Nightingale’s persona responds to her being a figure more akin to the pícaro than the “lady,” and in many ways her career in the Crimea attests to that. “In adopting the narrative voice of an ironic ‘yellow’ pícara,” Fish argues, “Seacole valorized both her commonality with Englishness and her Creole Jamaican otherness for an English reader.”²⁴ This connection with the picaresque had been hinted at by Sandra Paquet earlier—albeit without reference to the term “picaresque”—when she examined Seacole’s trajectory from the margins to the center, the typical pícaro’s movement across the social landscape:

Seacole crafts her self-image in a journey from the perceived margins of civilization to its center. She graduates from celebrity status among expatriates in Jamaica as a “Creole doctress,” to notoriety in New Grenada as the “yellow doctress,” to legendary status in the Crimea and Britain as Mother Seacole, guardian and purveyor of English values away from home. The values implicit in that journey organize Seacole’s narrative of travel, adventure, and ordeal, and project a precursory image of the restless, rootless, wandering West Indian that would become a distinctive feature of colonial and post-colonial West Indian autobiographical consciousness.²⁵

As Mario Cesareo has argued, in the picaresque novel—as a text that takes as its protagonist a social type (the subaltern subject in conditions of servitude to a powerful figure)—“the pícaro’s travels consist of a displacement through social institutions from a condition of subalternity.” The pícaro, Cesareo argues, is “a subject-in-institutional-transit.”

The instrumentation of the self and her body that makes that transiting possible presupposes a flexibility and a theatricality that forms the conditions of necessity of that mask—the theatrical semiotics of the pícaro being the underside to the symbolic economy of the sublime, with its aesthetics of rigidity and its rhetorical coincidence between signifier and signified: in the sixteenth century, the (hegemonic) knight is produced as a face (novel of chivalry), the (subaltern) page as a mask (picaresque novel), that is, as a face gesticulating within the realm of need, affirming its will to survival within a framework of asymmetrical power relations. Both imaginative operations constitute two sides of the same coin, that is, both express hegemony’s construction of itself and the Other. They represent but in no way express the Other: the pícaro, as a hero who narrates her autobiography, does so from a hegemonic position—either by having repented of past deeds (Guzmán de Alfarache), or by having overcome her dereliction (Lazarillo de Tormes).²⁶

The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands shares with the picaresque tale not only its tracing of its heroine’s transit through geographic, social, and institutional landscapes but the hegemonic position from which the narrative is articulated. Seacole, like the pícaro, writes from the position she has achieved at the end of her trajectory, that of “Mother Seacole,” heroine of the Crimea, a position articulated through her claim to “fame.” The text, as the narrative of how she got there—as is typical of picaresque narratives—acknowledges the end of transit for Seacole and has as its function that of securing the position attained. The text’s links to the picaresque autobiography are more significant than those to the travelogue. The travelogue, for example, seeks to convey the immediacy of transit, aspiring to take the reader along on a voyage of discovery. Seacole, like the pícaro, speaks from a consciousness of transit that has deposited her in a place that she must claim. The fact that what she seeks to claim includes the seemingly intangible notion of “fame,” something that can be held only by individuals, underscores her aspiration to construe herself as a modern subject.

For Seacole, then, fame and recognition become affirmations of that hegemonic space her exploits have gained for her. The publication of *The Wonderful Adventures* in 1857 can be seen, in that light, as her appeal to the English public for acknowledgment of that space. Unlike Nightingale, who, given her social position and the official nature of her efforts in the Crimea, does not need to make such an appeal, Seacole, entering the site of fame from the margins, must insist on what she sees as her due. Hence her perceived need to remind her readers of her accomplishments through testimonials and quotations from those at the center of British society—primarily officers but also common soldiers who have attained a temporary centrality through patriotic gratitude that would not have been accorded to them because of class origin. Every award of those she received—the Crimean Medal, the French Legion of Honor, and a

Turkish decoration—becomes an emblem of recognition and evidence to sustain her case.

I would argue that the elaboration of her “fame,” the allure of recognition, is a project that predates, even motivates, the writing of *The Wonderful Adventures*. Whether her gratification in her growing fame emerged out of pique at her rejection by the Nightingale group, exacerbated by the one meeting with Nightingale in the Crimea described in the book, is impossible to know. It is nonetheless clear that in order to claim fame—and in view of the fact that she could not claim fame *with* Nightingale—she had to do it, to a certain extent, *against* Nightingale.

The comparisons with Nightingale that underlie Seacole’s narrative may have been suggested by the ways in which her own reputation had been established in the British press. The press reported that the soldiers had taken to calling Seacole the “black Nightingale.” William Howard Russell, war correspondent from the *Times* in London, had championed her work in the Crimea, offering testimony not only of her work but of the immediacy of her presence in the battlefield, with frequent comments on the risks she took and the help she offered in comparison to Nightingale’s relative distance and safety at Scutari. “I have seen her go down, under fire, with her little store of creature comforts for our wounded men; and a more tender or skilful hand about a wound or broken limb could not be found among our best surgeons. I saw her at the assault on the Redan, at the Tchernaya, at the fall of Sebastopol, laden, not with plunder, good old soul! But with wine, bandages, and food for the wounded or the prisoners.”²⁷

Upon Seacole’s return to England in financial distress, Russell (who later wrote a preface for her book) took up her cause, stirring a flurry of correspondence in the *Times* that underscored Seacole’s position relative to that of Nightingale, a comparison that struck a sympathetic chord among readers whose relatives Seacole had aided in the Crimea. “Where are the Crimeans?” asked one writer. “Have a few months erased from their memories those many acts of comforting kindness which made the name of the old mother venerated throughout the camp? While the benevolent deeds of Florence Nightingale are being handed down to posterity with blessings and imperishable renown, are the humbler actions of Mrs Seacole to be entirely forgotten?”²⁸

Russell’s enthusiasm for Seacole’s work brought her to the attention of the very popular *Illustrated London News* and the British weekly *Punch*, which published a glowing tribute to Seacole in December 1856, entitled “A Stir for Seacole.”²⁹ (It has been claimed that the phrase “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again” was coined by *Punch* in 1856 in reference to Seacole’s perseverance in making her way to the Crimea.) In July 1857, aware of the precarious state of Seacole’s finances, *Punch*, under the auspices of Lord Rokeby and Lord George Paget, both of whom had commanded British divisions in the Crimea, launched a four-day benefit concert fund at Royal Surrey Gardens in her honor. The spectacular affair included one thousand performers with nine military bands

and an orchestra. Mrs. Seacole, as newspapers reported, sat between Rokeby and Paget in the front of the central gallery while her name was “shouted by a thousand voices”; “the genial old lady rose from her place and smiled benignantly on the assembled multitude, amid tremendous and continued cheering.” “Never,” wrote a reporter, “did woman seem happier.”³⁰ She had received, it was claimed, “the reception that Florence Nightingale would have had, had she not studiously avoided it.” (Nightingale was, at this period, deeply into the painful discovery of the human cost of her blunders in the Crimea and deeply troubled by her inability to make the British authorities make the distressing statistics and their cause public.)

The Seacole fund-raiser, although having reportedly drawn very large crowds, resulted in disappointing profits of about £233, because of heavy expenses and poor planning. However, the financial failure of the venture did not lessen Seacole’s popular support and fame, which were substantiated by her receipt of the Crimean War medal from Queen Victoria and the patronage of Alexandra, princess of Wales, for whom Seacole worked as a masseuse. She was a frequent visitor to royal residences, as a result, and had her bust sculpted by the queen’s nephew Prince Victor of Hohenhole-Langerburg, later Count Gleichen. But her popularity, in London as well as in Kingston (to where she traveled frequently after she settled in England) was confirmed, above all, by the success of *The Wonderful Adventures* after its publication in 1857, which endured until Seacole’s death in 1881. A reference to her being much sought after by the music halls to recount her “war experiences” has not been verified. In 1867 a second fund was established, with the support of Queen Victoria herself, whose goal was “to place her beyond the reach of want.”³¹ On her death in 1881, the *Times* and the *Manchester Guardian* published eloquent testimonials praising Seacole’s personal courage and selfless contributions to the Crimean campaign, with the *Times* reminding readers that “she was present at many battles and at the risk of her life often carried the wounded off the fields.” Even more eloquent testimony of her success was her leaving an estate valued at something over £2,600, an impressive amount at the time and one that substantiates her having died in relatively comfortable circumstances. Her will gave further evidence of her financial stability through legacies of money and a diamond ring to Count Gleichen and of her “best set of pearl ornaments” to an eldest daughter of whom no mention is ever made in her memoirs.

Seacole, as the result of the fame she successfully claimed as reward for her services, has become herself a “site” into which and through which others can map themselves. Seacole’s name, as a powerful symbol of “place,” continues to be invoked by those seeking or willing to open spaces for British citizens of African descent in Great Britain. Her name has become a “rallying point” for minority nurses complaining of racism in the National Health Service and feminists concerned about the too-restrictive aspects of current nursing practices in Great Britain. As her symbolic presence has taken hold, her name can

be invoked in the name of opportunities for black women in Britain. The Royal College of Nursing, as a salient example, offers a nursing fellowship in her name—the Mary Seacole Nursing Leadership Award—given annually to nurses, midwives, and health practitioners wishing to undertake research or development projects related to ethnic minority communities.

The invocation of “space” has its element of ritual. The tale of the discovery of Seacole’s tomb, which bears the inscription “A notable nurse who cared for the sick and wounded in the West Indies, Panama, and on the battlefields of the Crimea,” recalls the well-known narrative of the discovery of Zora Neale Hurston’s grave by fellow writer Alice Walker. Seacole’s grave was located by Elsie Gordon, former editor of the *Nursing Mirror*, after she found clues to its location in a slip of paper inserted into an old copy of Seacole’s autobiography at a London bookseller’s. The information led her to Seacole’s grave in St. Mary’s Roman Catholic Cemetery in Kensal Green, London. Gordon organized a special ceremony of reconsecration on 20 November 1973 under the auspices of the British Commonwealth Nurses War Memorial Fund, the Lignum Vitae Club, a Jamaican women’s group based in London, and the support of the Jamaican Nurses Association (U.K.). The Mary Seacole Association, founded in 1980 by a number of self-described “Seacolites” committed to raising public awareness of Seacole’s career, holds a commemorative service at the site every May first, the anniversary of her death, followed by a lunch and a lecture. It is more than anything due to their efforts that the Florence Nightingale Museum has recognized the need to dedicate a niche to Seacole-related memorabilia. The three medium-sized walls that display objects and documents recounting Seacole’s career in the Crimea—a true “invasion” of Nightingale’s space—acknowledge her growing importance in the history of British nursing.

Recently, moreover, as a testament to Seacole’s enduring presence, she was made the subject of an opera premiered in London’s Covent Garden in October 2000, as part of Black History Month. Composed by Richard Chew from a libretto by SuAndi, *Mary Seacole* offers a fusion of Caribbean musical influences and Western operatic traditions in a celebration of “the ingenuity and initiative with which she brushed aside the usually steadfast Victorian boundaries of gender, class and race” to build her “fascinating and astonishing life story.” The promotion notes from which this description is taken celebrate Seacole’s “mould-breaking spirit” while resituating her vis-à-vis Florence Nightingale by referring to Seacole’s achievements as “hidden” by Nightingale’s.

As symbolic sites of identity, Nightingale and Seacole continue to be contested spaces. Well-known *Spectator* columnist Theodore Dalrymple,³² writing for the London *City Journal* in 1999, returns to the relativity of the spaces they occupy in British history in deploring the devaluing of “All Our Pomp of Yesterday.” Claiming, from a politically conservative position, that “every day brings a new act of vandalism against the past,” he alludes to an announcement that the union representing most nurses in Britain’s public hospitals had voted over-

whelmingly in favor of the replacement of Florence Nightingale by Mary Seacole as symbol of British nursing, claiming that Nightingale “represented the negative and backward elements of nursing” while Seacole was more representative of multicultural Britain. Nightingale, a union member had argued, came from a white, moneyed, Protestant background, and as such was “unrepresentative of the ethnic mix in today’s National Health Service.” The same union member equated this change to the dismantling of statues of Lenin in Eastern Europe: “It is in the same vein that the nursing profession must start to exorcise the myth of Florence Nightingale.” Dalrymple uses the Nightingale/Seacole dichotomy as an example of the increasingly frequent attacks on “cherished British institutions” in the name of a multicultural Great Britain: “These remarks would be beneath contempt—even if one did not subscribe to the view of Florence Nightingale as a secular saint—were it not for the fact that they so perfectly capture the bad temper of the times. Not to be statistically representative of ‘where we are at’ is sufficient to discredit any hero from the past. Seen in this light, Britain’s traditional culture is but the ideological veil that concealed an unjust, undemocratic, exploitative, oppressive society. We study it only to reinvigorate our own grievances by finding their roots.”³³

Poor Mrs. Seacole—indeed. One could argue, reading the pique to which her possible replacement of Nightingale as symbol of British nursing can bring the likes of Theodore Dalrymple, that she must be chuckling in her well-tended grave. The fact that she has become a signifying site of such importance in a redefined British culture attests to the success of her *Wonderful Adventures . . . in Many Lands* in articulating her presence in British history in opposition to that of Nightingale. The existence of her text, in which she builds an English presence in a remote and bloody battlefield that temporarily stood for “England,” means that despite the obliteration of the geographical sites on which one could affix a Blue Plaque in her name, she has attained a “place” that goes beyond locale.

Notes

1. This press release can be found on the English Heritage website (www.english-heritage.org.uk/index.html).
2. Mary Seacole, *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1988).
3. For the sake of consistency I will follow Seacole’s use of “England” and “English” in *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* to refer to “Great Britain” and “British.”
4. Sandra Pouchet Paquet, “The Enigma of Arrival: *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*,” *African American Review* 26, no. 4 (1992): 653.
5. Bernard McKenna, “Fancies of Exclusive Possession: Validation and Dissociation in Mary Seacole’s England and Caribbean,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 76, no. 2 (1997): 221.

6. Amy Robinson, "Authority and the Public Display of Identity: *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*," *Feminist Studies* 20, no. 3 (1994): 537, 538.
7. Ivette Romero-Cesareo, "Women Adrift: Madwomen, Matriarchs, and the Caribbean," in Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert and Ivette Romero-Cesareo, eds., *Women at Sea: Travel Writing and the Margins of Caribbean Discourse* (New York: Palgrave/St. Martin's, 2001), 155.
8. Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift, "Mapping the Subject," in S. Pile and N. Thrift, eds., *Mapping the Subject: Geographies of Cultural Transformation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 17.
9. T. de Lauretis, "Introduction: Feminist Studies/Critical Studies," in T. de Lauretis, ed., *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 9. Quoted by Pile and Thrift in "Mapping the Subject."
10. Seacole, *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*, 76.
11. Pile and Thrift, "Mapping the Subject," 21.
12. Seacole, *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*, 79–80.
13. Seacole, *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*, 79–80.
14. Seacole, *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*, 80.
15. Seacole, *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*, 79.
16. Sue Carpenter, "The Forgotten Angel of the Crimea," www.caribvoice.org/profiles/html. The essay discusses Seacole in connection to the documentary on her work presented on 4 September 2000 in the BBC Knowledge program *Hidden History*.
17. Carpenter, "The Forgotten Angel of the Crimea."
18. In one of several passages alluding to her pleasant motherly appearance, Seacole writes: "Time and trouble combined have left me with a well filled-out, portly form—the envy of many an angular Yankee female—and, more than once, it was in no slight danger of becoming too intimately acquainted with the temperature of the Bosphorus. . . . I accepted it all as a compliment to a stout female tourist, neatly dressed in a red or yellow dress, a plain shawl of some other colour, and a simple wide-awake, with bright red streamers. I flatter myself that I woke up sundry sleepy-eyed Turks, who seemed to think that the great object of life was to avoid showing surprise at anything; while the Turkish women gathered around me, and jabbered around me, in the most flattering manner" (86).
19. Seacole, *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*, 90.
20. Seacole, *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*, 89.
21. Seacole, *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*, 125.
22. Carpenter, "The Forgotten Angel of the Crimea."
23. Carpenter, "The Forgotten Angel of the Crimea."
24. Cheryl Fish, "Voices of Restless (Dis)continuity: The Significance of Travel for Free Black Women in the Antebellum Americas," *Women Studies* 26 (1997): 487.
25. Paquet, "The Enigma of Arrival," 651.
26. Mario Cesareo, "When the Subaltern Travels," in Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert and Ivette Romero-Cesareo, eds., *Women at Sea: Travel Writing and the Margins of Caribbean Discourse* (New York: Palgrave/St. Martin's, 2001), 121–122.
27. Seacole, *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*, 172.
28. Ziggs Alexander and Audrey Dewjee, introduction to *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1984), 35.
29. "A Stir for Seacole," *Punch*, 6 December 1856.

30. All quotations in this passage are taken from Peter Fryer's portrait of Seacole in his book *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984).
31. Alexander and Dewjee, introduction to *Wonderful Adventures*, 34.
32. Theodore Dalrymple, "All Our Pomp of Yesterday," in *City Journal* 9, no. 3 (1999): 111.
33. Dalrymple, "All Our Pomp of Yesterday," 112.