

*Wonderful Adventures: Transcending  
Liminality and Redefining Identity in  
Mary Jane Grant Seacole's Autobiography*

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Mary Jane Grant Seacole (1805–1881), born to a Creole mother and a Scottish father in Kingston, Jamaica, was a celebrity in England because of her service to the British army as a nurse during the Crimean War. Seacole is the first Black British woman to write an autobiography. Her significance, however, has only lately been applauded, over a century later, as the result of the republication of her eponymous autobiography, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* (1857), in 1984 and again in 2005. Seacole negotiates her identity in the autobiography around complex relationships between black and white, between the West Indies and Britain, making for a fascinating example of postcolonial self-narration. This paper examines how Mary Seacole employs strategic liminality to transgress the boundaries of race and gender; it also addresses how Seacole's autobiography sheds light on the discursive patterns of nineteenth-century constructions of identity.

Evelyn O'Callaghan emphasizes the “non-stereotypical representations” of Seacole as a Black West-Indian woman. She says,

Seacole's narrative [does not] concern itself with constructions of the West Indies. A brief sketch of her parentage, childhood and young womanhood in Jamaica takes up the first one and a half chapters and then, apart from an eight-month sojourn in the island in 1853, the entire narrative is set abroad. (170)

Indeed, Seacole makes plain her aims and states, “It is not my intention to dwell at any length upon the recollections of my childhood” (11). Sara Salih posits that

The absence of Jamaica in *Wonderful Adventures* has been explained in a number of ways: Simon Gikandi suggests that

Seacole disinvests herself of a Jamaican Creole identity in order to reconstruct herself as English.... Other critics concur with his view that Seacole evades the problem of “race” and lives in denial of her blackness. (xix)

In the opening pages of Seacole’s autobiography, the reader is initiated into the world of her ambivalent personality. Hippolyte explains her liminal presence in terms of a narrative strategy designed “to circumvent charges of unfeminine conduct, and avoid confirming constructed images of the black woman as “Other” in order to shape a textual persona that is both proud of her difference *and* acceptable to the white British audience at whom her book is targeted” (qtd. in O’Callaghan 171). O’Callaghan elaborates: “her solution [to her liminal position] is to place herself firmly within a mid-Victorian *ideal* of Englishness by valorizing its codes—self-help, bravery, hard work, moral restraint, public duty.... Further, her adventures ... align her with European civilization” (172). Rather than nostalgically yearning for a home, Seacole, as a colonized subject in the service of the British Empire, sympathizes with Englishness yet opens a feminized space for herself as a Jamaican Creole. Sandra Pouchet Paquet argues that Seacole’s writing

[brings] into sharp focus the conflicts and contradictions of identity, authority, and freedom built into the relationship between Europe and the Americas, seat of empire and dependent colonies, master and slave, men and women.... The fundamental freedom articulated in her narrative is the freedom to be a subject of the British Empire and to be celebrated as a unique individual who challenges the boundaries of race, gender, and privilege within the parameters of that Empire. (651)

Seacole’s account of her life experiences demonstrates the way in which colonized subjects engage with the genre of autobiography.

In *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson affirm that “a growing number of post-modern and postcolonial theorists contend that the term *autobiography* is inadequate to describe the extensive historical range and the diverse genres and practices of life narratives and life narrators in the West

and elsewhere around the globe” (4). According to Smith and Watson, “[e]xperience ... is the very process through which a person becomes a certain kind of subject owning certain identities in the social realm, identities constituted through material, cultural, economic, and interpsychic relations” (25). Autobiography, as a narrative form that can give voice to the Other, becomes, according to Linda Anderson, “both a way of testifying to oppression and empowering the subject through ... cultural inscription and recognition. By considering such issues as identity, difference, and recognition, autobiography takes into account the “subject’s discursive position *and* material/historical location” (104). With this perspective in mind, the West-Indian-rooted Briton Mary Jane Grant Seacole’s autobiography can be regarded as a peculiar example of the genre.

For the colonized, autobiography “has often served as a tactic of intervention in colonial repression” (Smith and Watson 45). Hence, writing autobiography requires “an access to memory to tell a retrospective narrative of the past and to situate the present within that experiential history” (16). Writing about memory, then, becomes writing about one’s particular life experiences. Seacole’s identity as “doctress,” for example, is closely related to her nursing work in Panama and Haiti, and is based on her early life experience in Jamaica where she learned healing from her mother. By connecting herself to a matrilineal lineage Seacole notifies her readers that “being a doctress” is not peculiar to her mother but is also a characteristic of most Creole women of the region. “My mother kept a boarding-house in Kingston,” she writes, “and was, like very many of the Creole women, an admirable doctress, in high repute with the officers of both services, and their wives.... 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” (11–12). Despite this allusion to her early influences, her memories about Kingston form only a small portion of her autobiography. Most of Seacole’s account of her wonderful adventures in various lands seems designed to show her commitment to nursing, often helping British colonists and military personnel in tropical zones that ravage them with cholera and yellow fever. This helped establish her social acceptability in

the imperial mind. As a nurse in service to the British troops throughout the Crimean War, Seacole crosses the borders of liminality to position her West Indian identity firmly within imperial parameters.

Many critics have commented on Seacole's popularity in Britain. Claire Midgley notes that "the positive public image of Mary Seacole that circulated in Victorian Britain acted as some counter to the increasingly negative views of black people that were developing in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century" (259). As a mulatto Creole woman, Seacole succeeded in breaking through the rigid barriers of identity discourse, particularly in terms of otherness, and she managed to gain positive public recognition. O'Callaghan refers to the difficulties that a writer of colour encountered in "adopt[ing] a position *as a woman* ... [and] claim[ing] a hard and fast site within any one discursive or generic vehicle" (10). She underlines the importance of these "lost and silenced voices' ... [which contributed to] the construction of the West Indies from a woman-authored perspective" (14). However, in her introduction to the edition of Seacole's autobiography Salih remarks, "... Seacole evades straightforward definition as 'black,' 'Black British' or even 'Jamaican,' partly because she uses a number of self-identifications: 'I am a Creole, and have good Scotch blood coursing in my veins' she announces on the first page of her narrative" (xv–xvi). Salih adds,

[Seacole's] use of the word "Creole" is an appropriation and a refusal of the racial category into which she would undoubtedly have been slotted.... Instead, she emphasizes her "maternal," "feminine" qualities, so that if Seacole's national, cultural or "racial" affiliations remain multiple and difficult to define, her gender identification is clear from the outset. (xvi)

Seacole's multiple identifications are partly a function of her mobility. *Wonderful Adventures* owes its reputation to the author's travels around the world and her self-definition as a wanderer. As a result of the Enlightenment and the European knowledge-building process in the eighteenth century, travel both from the West to the East and from the East to the West contributed greatly to cultural interaction and negotiation, and even to the overcoming of some racial and gender preju-

dices. Nonetheless, early travellers to the British West Indies had already mapped the territory in their minds through earlier accounts of it. As a natural outcome of this preconception their first encounter with the exotic Other functioned to confirm their expectations. European women did indeed travel from the West to exotic landscapes to satisfy their curiosity, to generate knowledge, and to realize their space and place vis-à-vis the black Other. But we must not forget that West Indian women also travelled from the East to the imperial centres of the West. Their travel objectives were varied. Seacole travelled for adventure and independence, and to achieve success in nursing. She also travelled to gain access to the world of patriarchal and imperial mastery. O'Callaghan comments that

[The book] illustrates intersecting discourses in that Seacole too undercuts the masculinist genre of the adventure quest by representing herself as an independent and resourceful female traveller, thus complicating Victorian notions of femininity ... and [she] appropriat[es] the gaze of the discoverer to comment on European space. (65)

Although she was subjected to the negative consequences of British imperialism, Seacole ultimately shares British values and never gives a nostalgic account of a homeland to which she longs to return. As Karina Williamson comments, “the interest of Mrs. Seacole’s story in itself, and as a social record, is indisputable. It provides a rare insight into the attitudes and feelings of a coloured woman in the heyday of British imperialism, the more telling because of the author’s ambivalent feelings about race and colour” (113).

Seacole had good reason to leave Jamaica. She writes about the deaths of both her mother and husband following one another, her unfortunate loss of her house in Kingston during the great fire of 1843, and the spread of a cholera epidemic, all of which she considers to be essential reasons for her migration from Jamaica and her establishment of a “longstanding relationship to the British military” (Paquet 658). Seacole first goes to Panama, where she joins her brother Edward, who was an early immigrant entrepreneur. There, he owned a hotel that catered to

“Americans travelling overland by mule to and from the gold country in their ‘exciting race for gold’” (Salih xxiii). Detailing her rough arrival in Panama with good humour, Seacole recalls running the British Hotel in Cruces followed by the purchase of another hotel in the town of Gorgona. In the hotel she offered meals and supplies to the motley groups of men and women that passed through the area. When the cholera epidemic struck Cruces, rather than being a mere spectator of its symptoms, Seacole became an active fighter against the disease. She was identified as “the yellow woman from Jamaica with the cholera medicine” (Seacole 31). Already assuming the identity of “doctress,” she describes her attempt to examine the corpse of a baby to learn more about the deadly disease:

[I] persuaded [the man carrying the body of the dead child] ... that it would be for the general benefit and his own, if I could learn from this poor little thing the secret inner workings of our common foe; and ultimately he stayed by me, and aided me in my first and last *post mortem* examination. (34)

By telling of her experiences during this medical crisis, Seacole represents herself as knowledgeable and capable, thereby transgressing the boundaries that ideologically mark Creoles as non-intellectual, and establishing her image in the text as a highly spirited woman in search of medical solutions by means of the scientific method. Her survival proves her physical strength and her actions demonstrate her values. Pouchet Paquet states, “in the freedom of frontier towns like Cruces, Gorgona, and Escribano, [Seacole] acquires new knowledge and new skill (659–60). She further notes that “[Seacole’s] speculative ventures are represented as bastions of ‘civilized’ values, in places where civilization does not yet rule” (659).

Another notable aspect of these adventures is Seacole’s encounter with the racial attitudes of Americans, who, in contrast with the British, were determined to maintain their view of people of colour primarily as slaves. Her outrage at this prejudice and her defiance of American xenophobia are invariably presented in terms that demonstrate her superiority in intellect, culture, and articulation to the Americans who insult

her. Significantly, she rarely identifies British racism at this time. Her commitment to Britain is strong.

Upon her return to Jamaica, Seacole learned of Britain's participation in the Crimean War and wanted to be a volunteer and "a witness to war" as a nurse after gaining experience for "eight months in Jamaica employing her medical skills during a yellow fever epidemic" (Salih xxvi). When Florence Nightingale, together with a group of nurses, was invited to the Crimea, Seacole longed to join them. However, Seacole was aware that her otherness as a Creole was considered "something of an anomaly by the white people she encountered in her quest for employment" (Salih xxvii). Rejected by Florence Nightingale and by British official war office, Seacole used her own money to buy goods, medical supplies, and transport to the Crimea. She writes:

I ... longed more than ever to carry my busy ... fingers where the sword or bullet had been busiest, and pestilence more rife. I had seen much of sorrow and death elsewhere, but they had never daunted me; and if I could feel happy binding up the wounds of quarrelsome Americans and treacherous Spaniards, what delight should I note experience if I could be useful to my own "sons," suffering for a cause it was so glorious to fight and bleed for! (70–71)

Seacole's *Wonderful Adventures* defied the expectations of "a Victorian readership [that] might have found [such writing] less acceptable in a woman" (Salih xxx). But Seacole's situation as a Jamaican Creole who struggled hard to be aligned with the British army can be likened to the case of the mothers of the British nation, who were given the right to vote due to their service to the army during the World Wars. Seacole's arrival in the Crimea where she ran the British Hotel at Spring Hill and nursed British soldiers back to health provided her with a name congruent with her female identity as a "Mother." Salih observes, "her hotel, the food and drink on offer there, and Seacole herself c[a]me to stand for everything British and imperialistic" (xxix). She was valued as a nurse and a nurturer. In her eyes her reputation rivalled that of Florence Nightingale, and she has gone down in history as a pioneer. Chris Willis

describes nursing as “a highly acceptable middle-class profession” in the nineteenth century and adds her “thanks to the work of [both] Florence Nightingale and Mary Seacole” (63).

Seacole’s attempts to identify herself with Florence Nightingale as a national heroine were not seriously respected by Nightingale herself, who described Seacole to her brother-in-law as a woman of “drunkenness and improper conduct” (qtd. in Salih xxxii). However, Salih explains that

There is no supporting evidence for Nightingale’s statements concerning Seacole.... The relationship between Seacole and Nightingale seems mutually ambivalent, and yet nineteenth-century constructions of both women consistently emphasize their proper femininity—Nightingale’s virginal pallor and purity, Seacole’s robust maternity and patriotic spirit of enterprise. (xxxii)

Seacole writes about her experiences in Constantinople, Malta, and Gibraltar, and speaks of acquaintances recalling her earlier care in the West Indies who embraced her as “old Mother Seacole.” She was presented with a letter of introduction to Miss Nightingale, who was, at that time, “at the hospital of Scutari” (Seacole 78). She was greeted with a certain suspicion as to the nature of her visit. However, Seacole was invited to Miss Nightingale’s room, where she had her first impressions of Florence Nightingale as “[a] slight figure, in the nurses’ dress; with a pale, gentle, and withal firm face ... [with] a keen inquiring expression ... that Englishwoman whose name shall never die, but sound like music on the lips of British men until the hour of doom” (82). Nightingale refused to have Seacole on her team of nurses, and Seacole, with her usual entrepreneurial spirit gathered stores and medical supplies and positioned herself much closer to the front lines than Nightingale’s hospital. She was selfless in her work. Although she made money, she reinvested it in necessities for the diseased and the injured.

Seacole, dressed in her “favourite yellow dress, and blue bonnet, with the red ribbons,” emphasizes how unforgettable were scenes she witnessed at Scutari (88). She notes, “I declare that I saw rough bearded



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men stand by and cry like the softest-hearted women at the sights of suffering they saw ... [and] I have often heard men talk and preach very learnedly and conclusively about the great wickedness and selfishness of the human heart ...” (88). Seacole’s British Hotel at Spring Hill became a welcome shelter for its lodgers and secured her a new space in terms of Englishness. Pouchet Paquet claims,

She recreates her life in print to reflect the legendary, marginalized figure of a woman of colour and a colonial who, by her heroic service, would redefine her individual value and status within the Empire that had colonized her history ... As an autobiographical subject, [Mrs. Seacole] is disengaged from the Jamaican community and contextualized in the metropolitan heart of Empire. (655)

Seacole is positioned outside the imperial premises of Englishness. Nevertheless, she develops a sense of belonging by establishing a familial bond through “her British soldier-sons.” Angelia Poon offers,

At once embodying and transgressing the norms of Victorian femininity, Seacole came to represent the comforts and values of home in the relative absence of other white British women. Seacole’s attempt to legitimize her hold on the British public’s attention as a benevolent desexualized mother figure had to be undertaken in the shadow of ... Florence Nightingale. (502)

Although she was a loyal servant of the British national cause, some doubted Seacole’s honesty. Her finances suffered from the heavy prices she paid for goods needed by the soldiers. Left with useless materials when the war ended, she returned to England and finally went into bankruptcy. Salih explains, “the bankruptcy of the firm of Seacole and Day after the Crimean campaign proved beyond a doubt that Seacole was a true and altruistic British patriot whose national service led to her financial ruin” (xxxvi).

Seacole transgresses the hegemonic boundaries of her colonial West Indian identity by forging a new one as a Crimean heroine and opens a new space for herself through her narratives of Englishness. Ania Loomba

says that “colonialist categories of knowledge had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as ‘Other’ ... [which] is crucial to the process of colonial subject formation. It therefore cannot simply be erased or shrugged off as a kind of false consciousness” (182). Counter-discourses of colonialism flourished in the narratives of the colonial “subjects who are themselves complex, mixed-up products of diverse colonial histories” (182). Seacole resists seeing herself as a colonial subject and insists on her identity as a “doctress” in service of the British forces. For example, she feels flattered that her Crimean patients, with “names familiar to all England ... were glad of me as nurse and doctress,” and she comments, “I am proud to think that a gallant sailor, on whose brave breast the order of Victoria rests ... sent for the doctress [Seacole] whom he had known in Kingston” (112). She also mentions the high quality and delicious taste of her “sponge-cakes” served at the British Hotel, which rival those of “any pastry-cook in London, even Gunter [a fashionable tea shop in London where sweet meats were popular by the early nineteenth century]” (123).

In her address to the reader towards the end of the book, Seacole apologizes for her “unhistorical inexactness” and acknowledges that her “memory is far from trustworthy” (128). She adds that she has neither written records nor a diary to prove her claims. She describes herself as “only the historian of Spring Hill,” not of the Crimean War, determined “to tell the story of [her] life in [her] own way” (128). Seacole tries to appear modest in welcoming the compliments about her conduct as a Crimean heroine of the battlefield. In her account of the Crimean War, she describes war as if she were a neutral spectator. She writes, “I shall now endeavour to describe my out-of-door life as much as possible, and write of those great events in the field of which I was a humble witness. But I shall continue to speak from my own experience simply...” (128).

After the Allied forces were victorious against Russia, Seacole visited Tchernaya, where the battle was fought. She describes the Russians’ impressions of her, showing a flash of humour and racial self-awareness: “I was one of the first to ride down to the Tchernaya, and very much delighted seemed the Russians to see an English woman. I wonder if they

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thought they all had my complexion” (161). As soon as the war ended, everyone longed to go back home except Seacole, since “it would cause [her] ruin” due to the high expenses paid for various articles and the store investments made for stock (162). She was aware that after the war, these stocks would be of no use, and no one would be interested in buying them. Thus Seacole was in poverty after the war, “[w]hereas others in [her] position may have come back to England rich and prosperous...” (170). She says, “it was pretty sure that I should go to England poorer than I left it, and although I was not ashamed of poverty; beginning life again in the autumn—I mean late in the summer of life—is hard up-hill work” (164). She likens life at this point to a stage where “the play was fairly over, that peace had rung the curtain down, and that we, humble actors in some of its most stirring scenes, must seek engagements elsewhere” (167). Yet the heroes of the Crimea proved that they never forgot their ‘mother’ through their financial aid, which Seacole accepted in her old age “with feelings of pride and pleasure” (170). Such an act of remembering symbolically signifies the recognition of Seacole by the dominant culture. Smith and Watson state,

in the case of persons outside the dominant culture, persons unknown and marginalized by virtue of their lack of public status, appeals to the authority of experience may be explicit. Such appeals may be made on the basis of sexual or ethnic, or racial, or religious, or national identity claims. In other words identity confers political and communal credibility. (28)

By affiliating herself with Englishness, Seacole aims to transcend the liminality of her West Indian identity and legitimize herself as an autobiographical subject.

Poon acknowledges the significance of political awareness about “being English in the Victorian period” owing to “a series of distinctions such as those between citizen and foreigner, colonizer and colonized, and metropole and colony” (501). Poon also finds

cross-border interactions ... threaten[ing] to muddy the imperial landscape with unsanctioned forms of knowledge and

affiliation ... Seeking self-consciously to identify herself with the “mother” country ... [Seacole] constantly tests the waters of reception by English society in the mid-nineteenth century. (501)

As a woman positioned between conflicting worlds, West Indian and British—or three including America—Seacole’s authenticity in narration is closely linked with her identity. Smith and Watson underscore this general point: “Autobiographical narrators come to consciousness of who they are, of what identifications and differences they are assigned or what identities they might adopt, through the discourses that surround them” (34).

Seacole’s memories of her friend being targeted by racial and gendered space of the “Other” are a vivid part of her “first impressions of London.” She notes,

Strangely enough, some of the most vivid of my recollections are the efforts of the London street-boys to poke fun at my and my companion’s complexion. I am only a little brown—a few shades duskier than the brunettes whom you all admire so much; but my companion was very dark, and a fair ... subject for their rude wit. (13)

Through the autobiographical narration of her wonderful adventures in various lands, Seacole transports herself to new spaces of experience as a liberated subject, to be identified with a project Smith and Watson note in many postcolonial autobiographies: “writers around the globe are proposing new concepts of subjectivity” that are described as “transcultural, diasporic, hybrid, and nomadic” (132). They go on to state, “such autobiographical acts move the ‘I’ toward the collective and shift the focus of narration toward an as-yet virtual space of community, across and beyond the old boundaries of identification” (132).

New spaces of identification often engage the subject in the kind of mimicry of colonial values we see in Seacole’s autobiography. Homi K. Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, identifies “colonial mimicry ... [as] the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of difference*

*that is almost the same, but not quite*" (86). Amy Robinson also comments on the British colonial situation in the West Indies from 1772 to 1833 as follows:

[I]t is precisely the contradictions and ambiguities of British colonial policy which establish Great Britain as the "authentic" geographic and psychic *location* of West Indian identity, producing a discourse of mimicry as part of the self-articulation of the formerly colonized.... Such effective appropriations are thus achieved at the expense of the West Indies as a defining national context of identity and the subsidization of Great Britain as the *location* of the authentic British subject. (540)

Gareth Griffiths emphasizes the problematic representation of the hybridized subjects of the distant colonies within white systems of representation, who "legitimate themselves or speak in ways which menace the authority of the dominant culture precisely in so far as it 'mimics' and so subverts it" (241). Ostensibly imprisoned within the boundaries of race, gender, and history, Seacole redefines her space as black and female with West Indian roots. Her accounts of her travels and strong admiration for English taste prove her to be someone with an ambivalent relationship to British Imperialism. As Pouchet Paquet acknowledges, "what saves Seacole from unmediated parasitism and naïve individualism is the care with which she establishes her love of travel and adventure, her devotion to the British military, and her professional interest in medicine" (655). These are some characteristics that mark her both as a public figure and as "the inheritor of a native tradition of healing" (658).

After her return to England, the old "mother" of the Crimean War was almost forgotten until she was rediscovered through D. A. Meritis's letter to *The Times* to remind Crimeans "not to forget Mary Seacole" (Salih xxxvii). After that public notice, funds were raised on behalf of Seacole of Crimea and her *Wonderful Adventures* was published. Although there are various accounts about the late years and death of Seacole, it seems probable that she died in London in 1881. In Jamaica, however, she was considered to be "a native of Kingston Jamaica' ... rather than a

Crimean (or indeed an English) ‘heroine,’” whereas the Jamaican *Daily Gleaner* claimed that, according to her editors, Seacole was considered a “‘Black British woman’ rather than ... a Jamaican” (Salih xli).

Thus her adventurous journeys in many lands can be associated with her “figurative journey into Englishness” (Poon 503), in accordance with Simon Gikandi’s comments on the subject:

To be a colonial subject in the nineteenth century, then, is to exist in a cultural cul-de-sac: you cannot speak or exist except in terms established by the *imperium*; you have to speak to exist, but you can utter only what the dominant allows you to utter; even when you speak against the culture of colonialism, you speak its language because it is what constitutes what you are. (qtd. in Poon 504)

Through mimicry of the “shared knowledge” and language, Seacole assumes “recognition” by means of the dominant ideology (Poon 504). She acts as a mediator between the black and white cultures by redefining her identity in terms of Englishness rather than blackness.

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