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"The Right Woman in the Right Place": Mary Seacole and Corrective Histories of Empire

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Abstract: *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*, the 1857 autobiography and war memoir by Jamaican nurse Mary Seacole, has had a long and prolific afterlife in British and Caribbean public imaginations. This article traces the corrective histories deployed to reorder Seacole's narrative into more contemporary political frameworks of anti-racism, multiculturalism, and humanitarianism. In doing so, this article lays bare the constructions of postcolonial black experience and emphasizes the complex experiences of black women in the diaspora. This includes a recognition of the limits of current conceptual frames of inclusion, agency, and resistance in black postcolonial studies and studies of empire.

Keywords: empire, gender, feminism, Mary Seacole, autobiography, race

A 2010 segment of the popular BBC series *Horrible Histories* is located in the offices of Cliff Whitelie, historical public relations agent ("Series 2, Episode 6"). His mission, in this "Vile Victorians"-themed sketch, is presented in the form of two figures: Florence Nightingale and Mary Seacole. Their pairing is a modern-day fable of multicultural inclusion, particularly of what I term corrective histories, or those representations of historical figures of blackness meant to engage, recover, and repair past racial injury. Seacole, as she writes in her memoir *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*, becomes again and again "the right woman in the right place" for such cultural labor (80).

Famous in the ranks of British soldiers and the press during the Crimean War, Seacole was extraordinarily well-traveled as an

entrepreneur-nurse who worked in the Caribbean, Central America, Eastern Europe, and the United Kingdom, as she documents in her 1857 memoir. Nightingale was, then and now, her foil: the middle-class British white woman who institutionalized modern nursing practices. Nightingale became a national and global icon of the profession; Seacole went from British Victorian celebrity to a century of disappearance, only to be resurrected in our contemporary moment as a heroine of multiculturalism as much for her accomplishments as for her racist snubbing by Nightingale and her eventual triumph in becoming a famous nurse and celebrity of the Crimean War. In the *Horrible Histories* episode, that triumph is rehearsed and replotted as an act of good publicity: it counters Nightingale's racism in the contemporary moment of multiculturalism to earn Seacole her rightful place in the historical record and public imagination. Seacole, in short, becomes a celebrity in the current moment, where her celebrity is to be read as a sign of racial progress and a correction of the racist silence that omitted her from history heretofore. But her celebrity status as one of the few black women whose self-written record endured this period of empire and as one of the only black women recognized by the British state during the era also lends critical suspicion to her archive for contemporary black postcolonial studies scholars. "Correcting" Seacole's place in history redeploys Seacole in the service of several competing narratives of national, postcolonial, and racial belonging, as well as antiracist political and intellectual discourse. This article traces these reanimated histories of Seacole in order to suggest the current limits and future possibilities of reimagining empire through the subjectivity of black women. This cynical assessment of how we produce corrective histories in the public sphere also elucidates the limitations of using Seacole as a symbolic figure, since her history and memoir cannot be held to traditional gendered narratives of racial and national heroism.

Mary Jane Grant Seacole was a mixed-race Jamaican nurse and sutler (a hotelier/general store keeper on the war front, for an inexact translation) born in 1805 who served soldiers in the Crimean War as well as in New Granada, Panama, and her native Jamaica. *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* traces Seacole's travels as

an exciting lure and as the basis for Seacole's inclusion in British historiography. The memoir has gone from a popular text in its own time to general obscurity, only to be reprinted and commemorated within the national histories of Britain and Jamaica (and in academic circles) in recent years. Told partially in the genre of a travel narrative and partially as a celebrity war memoir (of the Crimean War, fought against Russia from 1853 to 1856),[1] the volume sold out its first print run in its day. Upon its 1984, 1988, and 2005 reprints (the last of which is the edition that is cited throughout), critics tend to both marvel at Seacole's position as a well-known, respected colonial subject who was able to write her own version of her life apart from any connection to political movements and note the difficult affiliations with the British nation and empire required to achieve this position as a "global citizen," in the words of Cheryl Fish (15).[2]

Seacole's figure, as in the BBC series I discuss above, is tasked by critics to do the difficult cultural and political work of the present day, and her symbolic value stretches across British, Jamaican, black diasporic, and black feminist histories and imaginaries. Seacole's mobility in the emerging capitalist enterprises of empire sits uneasily with her use in corrective histories of race and existing models of historical, sexual, geographic, gendered, and political agency in the Black Atlantic world. Critics have categorized her as subversive of imperial regimes as well as indulgent of empires' violent economic and military imperatives.[3] This essay then investigates the thorny terrain of agentic subjectivity in relationship to Seacole and its usefulness in articulating—or not—the fullest spectrum of black civic participation in the New World under the British Empire, with black women as the center of this historical, geographic, and political imagination of empire even as they were not its central, rights-bearing subjects.[4]

In tracing Seacole's meteoric rise from a posthumous century of anonymity to the number one Black Briton in 2003, based on a poll ("100 Great"), we might also trace the emergence and construction of black history for a number of competing audiences, including academics, activists, the postcolonial state, and former colonial powers. In viewing these diverse and divergent paths of historicization and

commemoration, I also seek alternative interpretations of Seacole's legacy to the contemporary moment's relationship to empire, labor, gender, and sexuality—less as a corrective history of an individual in service of a predetermined set of political goals than a continuity of difficult sites that empire sets up for black women, in particular. This attention to corrective histories extends what Salamishah Tillet terms "civic myths"—"form[s] of collective memory" that serve the aims of, in her formulation, both the American state as well as counter-memories that challenge these national narratives (6). These myths, she argues, are surprisingly adaptable in the service of national narratives. This article points to racial myths, which often cross national lines—the specific stories we have told, retold, and adapted in service of the concept of race. These myths are frequently of white supremacy but also arise in the reparative mode of restoring black histories to the public sphere, a mode that is often but not always closely associated with either resisting the neoliberal state or rehabilitating the now repentant, supposedly post-racist state. Seacole's narrative and her figuration in academic work, state-sanctioned commemoration campaigns in Britain and Jamaica, and public culture surrounding multiculturalism and diversity are sites not of slavery but of post-enslavement narratives that illustrate Tillet's concept of civic estrangement—the alienation experienced by those black citizens of empire hailed to belong as their (hi)stories are denied or relegated to the margins by the post-slavery states that now claim them in and as acts of racial repair. Their histories suggest the multiplicity of black lives and experiences, as well as the fungibility those lives had and have for the reinforcement of empire's aims through to the present day. In this article, I also use Tillet's formulation of black exclusion from (American) citizenship to think through Seacole's problematic inclusion in national, racial, and empiric belonging—empire here meant to signify both the historically defined empire as the geographic, military, and capital reach of a sovereign state (i.e., the British Empire) as well as the more modern use of the term as a description of the complex network of global capital (in the work of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt) and African diasporic political and patriarchal belonging and/or exclusion (in the work of Michelle Stephens).

Seacole was poised at this intersection, as a woman authorized by empire to chase dangerous capital success in its farthest reaches while standing outside of official channels of citizenship that would have allowed her to claim rights as a black or Creole woman.[5] In the more contemporary moment, she is also taken up by Jamaica, Britain, and postcolonial and African American studies scholarship as a reworked figure of national pride and multicultural inclusion and a problematic supporter of empire and its violent and exclusionary exploits. Seacole's enthusiasm for empire abounded, as she found in the gaps that capital produced a path toward self-fulfillment as a Creole-identified woman in the nineteenth century. The history of empire teems with such stories—of the Creole woman hotel-keeper, for instance—that show how one can find on the underside of empire's violence the ways that black lives, and black women's lives in particular, were at the precarious center of its formation. Seacole's narrative showcases the innovative economic and social paths some took to achieve problematic but powerful forms of freedom. This freedom was enabled partially through a mobility that is often denied to black women in contemporary antiracist discourses, which often use as representative figures women who stay within the recognizable bounds of either feminized spheres of family and community or who engage in resistant masculinized action against empire's power.[6] How might one reconcile the intangible affects that colonialism and globalization produce—desire for cosmopolitan travel or money, for instance—with modes of raced and gendered identification that privilege the home, indigeneity, and loyalty to local communities? This essay argues that Seacole's circulations, both then and now, illustrate the complex relationship between her contemporary status as a multicultural icon and how historic conceptualizations of race can remain attached to narratives of resistance and exclusion.

I. Seacole and Multicultural Britishness

The 2010 BBC *Horrible Histories* clip that I describe above engages explicitly in a conversation about the production of a corrective history. It features an imagined public relations director for historical figures (Cliff Whitelie), whom a tall, pale Nightingale and a dark-skinned,

anachronistically Jamaican-accented Seacole are consulting to correct the historical record, which forgets to properly commemorate Seacole. After some back and forth, the overly slick, white public relations director agrees to take on Seacole's case, promising to tell her story via a nationally televised episode of the very same television show we are watching. Thus, British history and its accompanying racism are corrected and Seacole can now take her rightful place next to Nightingale's significant national legacy.

In fact, after her Victorian-era fame, Seacole's status changed from Crimean War heroine to minor figure in the buried annals of British history. She went from being reported on in "News of the World" in the *London Times* in August of 1856 (Salih, Introduction xi) to more marginal, incidental fame through to her death in 1881 in Britain. For many years, Seacole's brand of exemplary empiric celebrity failed to thrive in institutional forms in Britain the way that Nightingale's did—for instance, in the form of her own museum, textbook and curricular presence, and other media devoted to this pioneer of nursing and feminized labor. But as Seacole was rediscovered in the 1980s and 90s by both the British public and academics, her image and cultural significance shifted. Seacole's legacy highlights a nation struggling to come to terms with a multicultural citizenry after the virulent racist politics of the 1970s and 80s, initiated by Parliament Member Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech in 1968, which has reappeared in remarks by contemporary white supremacist politicians in Europe and the United States. Her redeployment in the contemporary British moment emerges in a familiar contemporary narrative that emphasizes racial injury as the identifying force of black histories and identifies multicultural inclusion and correction as the cure for said injury. The satiric edge of the BBC program both corrects history by righting the historical record of empire and critiques the limits of said corrections, as the "horrible histories" and "vile Victorians" of the show's title and subtitle suggest.

But the BBC episode is also a study in the comparative racialization—a dark-skinned Seacole next to the stark white Nightingale—that follows Seacole across her modern image as the foil to Nightingale's

legacy. Comparisons between Seacole and Nightingale are pervasive in contemporary reconstructions of British history. Advocates for recovering Seacole build off of "The Lady with the Lamp's" established credibility and legitimacy as an exemplary citizen to make their case for Seacole's commemoration, arguing for Seacole's representation on a stamp (issued in 2006), as a statue (controversially erected in 2015 after a protracted fight with Nightingale supporters and right-wing protesters), at her grave site (restored), and on two official historical plaques (one hung in 2005 and the other in 2007 when the first building site was demolished). "Seacolites" even successfully organized a Bicentenary exhibition at the Nightingale Museum in 2005 to mark the Crimean heroine's contributions to the field of nursing. Even Salman Rushdie employs the Seacole/Nightingale comparison as exemplary of the failures of Western history in *The Satanic Verses*: "What are they?—why, waxworks, nothing more—who are they?—History. See, here is Mary Seacole, who did as much in the Crimea as another magic-lamping lady, but, being dark, could scarce be seen for the flame of Florence's candle" (292). In addition to Rushdie's reference, several graphic illustrations of Seacole portray her alongside an increasingly perturbed and racist Nightingale and imagine Seacole's exasperation with and/or active resistance to Nightingale's individualized racist discourse (made to stand in for racist history—that which is purportedly rectified by exposing the bad racist/racism).[7] On 25 April 2011, *The New Yorker* printed a short piece on Seacole with a telling declaration: "Florence Nightingale strongly disapproved of Mary Jane Seacole, but that did not stop either of them" (Frazier).

The comparison between Seacole and Nightingale is not restricted to multicultural activism. As Seacole's place in the national curriculum was threatened by some parliamentarians in 2013, a series of Nightingale supporters began to publicly contest the commemoration of Seacole in the form of a statue. Their key argument was that Seacole had nothing to do, really, with pioneering the profession of nursing, as had the statistically minded Nightingale. Of course, this argument conveniently left out the structural racism that excluded nonwhite women from the newly institutionalized profession, including Nightingale's refusal of

Seacole's request to serve in Crimea. Those supporting Seacole's statue and inclusion in the national curriculum turned to solidifying her bona fides in science and medicine, as the new curriculum site *My Learning* emphasizes. The statue's sculptor, Martin Jenning, had to argue not only for the validity of the UK's first statue in honor of a black woman after a twelve-year campaign but for its size after public debate erupted around who should have the taller statue, Nightingale or Seacole. He also faced objections to the location of the statue, across from the house of Parliament's ground and in front of St. Thomas' Hospital, Nightingale's home base. Seacole's image was used for the "Re-imagine: Black Women in Britain" exhibition at the Black Cultural Archive exhibit of 2014 and to stoke right-leaning pundits who argue not only that Seacole was not "really" black but that "long after she was dead, zealots used Mrs. Seacole in their bitter campaign to abolish Britain and replace it with a multicultural nothingness" (Hitchens). The efforts to memorialize Seacole, then, have been met with objections to her taking up space materially and ideologically in and as British history, always in competition with Nightingale's assumed place in British history as a white woman and her perceived displacement.

If the conservative right and white feminists argue for Seacole's diminished glory because she signifies "multicultural nothingness" vis-à-vis British history, those working toward racial justice have their own objections to Seacole as the face of vulnerable and nonwhite populations given the experience of racism in Britain. For this group, too, Seacole's blackness is found insufficient: a 2015 op-ed in *The Voice*, self-identified as London's black newspaper, is entitled "What Did Mary Seacole Ever Do for Us as Black People?" As nursing awards, housing associations, nursery schools, and children's plays are named after or center on Seacole under the rubric of racial and social justice across Britain, some antiractist activists see this use of Seacole as a symbol for multiculturalism and the historical experience of racism as too easy. The claim that "white Britons love her even more than we [Black Britons] do" (Adebayo) pithily summarizes the assumed audience for Seacole's corrective histories. This use of Seacole's story demonstrates not meaningful black inclusion into British history nor an acknowledgement of systemic racism but rather

a nod to an individual who rose to the challenge of British racism. Seacole, in this critique, represents an idealized racial subject meant to assuage white colonial guilt without a deep reckoning with the history and present of structural racism.

Seacole's inclusion in Britain's national discourse recognizes the changing ethnic makeup of the UK after the Windrush's landing in 1948 and both engages in the possibility of what British sociologist Carl E. James refers to as "a [multicultural] education that unsettles the notion of cultural democracy and meritocracy" (108) and reproduces it. One can see this in, for example, the British-issued stamp of Seacole's portrait from the National Gallery. The stamp figures her as "Mother Seacole," showcasing her likely apocryphal war medals.[8] Merely including a nonwhite person in the long line of British history, it hardly needs to be said, does not disrupt narratives of Britishness that rest on colonial subjection and exclusion. Seacole's story in particular, with its concentrated effort to convey her individual industry and selflessness, is easily hailed into templates of exceptionalism and the incidental consequences of racial and gendered difference. This all the more easily marshals her into the British national fold through a strategic tokenism that erases anti-blackness even as it renders black women publicly visible in the service of a multicultural education.

After her mandatory if continually contested inclusion in the national curriculum just before the turn of the twenty-first century, a veritable cottage industry in Seacole-related texts emerged, including a BBC website and a range of children's books, plays, course guides, and documentaries devoted to the study of Seacole within the British educational system.[9] Almost all allude to her refused offer to serve in the official nursing corps in Crimea, and some, like Marcia Layne's play, also dramatize the only other instance in which Seacole herself spoke of her experience of blatant racism in England. When she traveled there as an adolescent, she writes in *Wonderful Adventures*, she was heckled by working class white children for her and—she emphasizes, more so—her companion's dark skin. Several of these texts take liberties with Seacole's de-emphasis of her Jamaican roots in *Wonderful Adventures*, conjuring instead the indigenous and Afro-influenced Caribbean

identity championed today, with pages devoted to Seacole's imagined natural healing methods.

Along with the risks of a multiculturalism that elides racist history in order to include black women in the national narrative, some narratives of Seacole engage in a romanticization of contemporary ideal Jamaican identity and heroism. In these narratives, she is portrayed as identifying with African and indigenous roots, sporting natural hair and dark skin and combating overt racism through industry, tenaciousness, and innovation. Combining both phenotypic and culturally stereotypical features of blackness with an emphasis on racial injury and selfless service to those in need, these updated visions of Seacole are reminders of the difficulty of teaching legacies of structural racism as the same bodies exploited then are employed now to speak to these histories as a corrective. The nineteenth century is not a moment devoid of its own nuanced debates around justice and freedom; Seacole's history resists a narrative of progress that supposes that we now know better. The politics of liberal multiculturalism, as political theorist Will Kymlicka outlines, "has costs and imposes risks, and these costs vary enormously both within and across societies" (20). Seacole's inclusion in official British history reveals a commitment to the institutionalization of difference that incorporates and manages it into the dominant structure even as some depictions seem to resist empire's reach.[10]

Seacole is not only used to correct British history's absences. Many narratives also erase Seacole's ambivalent relationship with a racial community, especially with fellow Creole or black Jamaicans. Seacole barely mentions her mixed race side of the family in her memoir, nor does she bring up local politics around race, class, labor, and rights. The press in her time did not usually take on her race as a significant or defining feature of her fame and service directly. Even *Punch*, the popular Victorian humor magazine, refers to her "berry brown face" just once in a long poem about Seacole ("A Stir for Seacole"). But Seacole's contemporary reissues feature her as a foremother, in Britain, to activism around the more equitable distribution of resources and as a sign of both antiracist sentiment and black institutional worth. Layne's drama for school-age children, for instance, imagines her at the start

of a long line of Caribbean-descended nurses working to earn respect in the British national health system. This genealogy is reflected in the numerous health institutions that have taken Seacole's name for all or part of their commitments to multicultural healthcare, as well as a building of the Home Office, the British government's agency for immigration, crime, and diversity ("UK Home Office Building"). The contemporary deployment of Seacole as Black Briton, in other words, rests on limited narratives of black identity and their intersections with Seacole's professional and national affiliations.

II. Seacole as Caribbean Heroine

Seacole is also being reimagined into postcolonial Caribbean celebrity. Seacole traveled not only to New World territories and global conflict zones but back and forth between Jamaica and England for the rest of her life post-Crimea, and her present-day influence extends to postcolonial Jamaican corrective histories. Jamaica's construction of history has different stakes than British multiculturalism. If Seacole in the British system is "the right woman in the right place," in the Jamaican context she never fully disappeared from public vision or imagination. After her death, she stayed in the local news. Her sister's obituary in *The Daily Gleaner* said of Mary Seacole: "She was an old Jamaican character who was quite a notable figure in her day and who was representative of a class of Jamaican women which have almost wholly passed away" ("Seacole"). This turn-of-the-century reference to Seacole shows a nostalgia for the waning privileges of empire for Creole elites. As I discuss below in this section, there was also an intimacy foregrounded in the history between Creole women—this "class of Jamaican women"—and English men.

The move to make Seacole a Jamaican national heroine—despite her mobile racial and geographic identifications in her lifetime—goes hand in hand with the effort to make Afro-Caribbean culture the national culture in the consolidation of an independent national identity. As Deborah Thomas argues about "the emotional resonance of nationality" in Jamaica (2), "the attempt to consolidate a nationalist state, to inculcate soon-to-be-ex-subjects [of the British empire] with a sense of national belonging and loyalty that would naturalize new relations of

authority, validated a particular kind of citizen and a specific vision of cultural 'progress' and 'development'" (5). Seacole is reclaimed into the Afro-Caribbean fold even while her memoir narratively distances her from enslaved and black-identified Jamaicans.

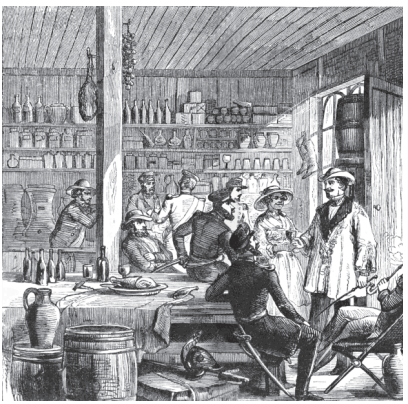
Seacole's innovation in her narrative derives from her experience as a Creole colonial subject. Her memoir reflects her understanding of the significance of visible recognition, legally and culturally, of the great variety of racialized categories, as well as the contingent racialized narrative plots and life paths available to colonial subjects in the Victorian era.[11] Seacole, of course, inherits capital opportunity and mobility from her Creole status, which puts her in a privileged position beside those freed black people who are dangerously laboring on the Panama railroad construction, for instance.[12] Seacole, according to Caribbeanist Rhonda Frederick, "repeatedly asserts her exceptional colour and professional skill" (498) to differentiate her body and her labor in compromised frontier locations where she is, as in Jamaica, among a range of races, classes, and classifications. But as with her marriage, Seacole barely mentions Jamaica at all in her memoir (a point that many of her contemporary critics note), thus also evading its complex racial and political context.[13]

Creole, for Seacole, designates a sticky area of race politics, standing as either the political "vanguard" or "buffer"—the mixed-race middle class who maintains investments in the racist status quo—of racial progress, as Shirley Thompson argues in *Exiles at Home* (220).[14] Understandings of race and power in this mid-Victorian era were not limited to ideas of freedom and bondage alone, nor was there necessarily a sense of racial community or solidarity among all those designated nonwhite. Mixed-race Creole citizenship in Jamaica, and for Seacole, was bound up in its "buffer" status, mitigating conflict between the white planter class and the freed blacks, in part due to the long history of freeing children born of slaves and masters in Jamaica, in contrast to the opposite custom in America; Seacole's mother, in fact, was also a free Creole who kept a hotel and nursed British soldiers.[15] Counter to novelist Anthony Trollope's comment in 1859 after staying in Seacole's sister's hotel that "[t]here is something of a mystery about hotels in the British West Indies. They are

always kept by fat middle-aged colored ladies who have not husbands," there is no "mystery" to Seacole's own frank admission of her parentage or the genealogy of her trades—that of hotelier and "doctress" (195).

In fact, a Creole woman as hotelier was so common that, though women had no official access to politics, the position of playing host to men of power from the colonies had a socio-political effect, as Frederick attests and postcolonial critic Jenny Sharpe outlines in her work on concubinage in the nineteenth-century Caribbean. There was power and protection—vanguardism within the buffer effect—in the influence of these unofficial socialities between Creole-identified Caribbean women and white British soldiers, sailors, and businessmen, even if one was kept out of formal political power.

Seacole, then, is one in a long line of Creole women who participated in civic hospitality, as outlined in the work of scholar Sean Goudie, even as this hospitality is laced with the fraught history of forced and coerced sexual relationships. Situating Seacole among Creole hospitality workers clarifies both the opportunities and the limits that, as Sandra Gunning argues, "color, status, region, and gendered experience" introduce into diaspora discourse ("Nancy Prince" 33). Seacole's Creole identification



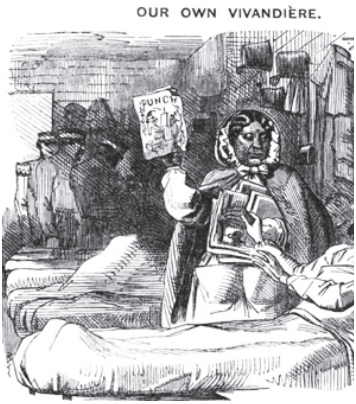


Fig. 1 and Fig. 2. Seacole in her recognizable roles, sutler and nurse, in Victorian-era illustrations from the original printing of *Wonderful Adventures* (1857) and from *Punch* magazine ("A Stir for Seacole," 1856)

left her vulnerable to claims like Nightingale's that she was part of an illicit economy: "I will not call it a 'bad house' [i.e., a brothel]—but something not very unlike it—in the Crimean War. . . . She was very kind to the men &, what is more, to the Officers—& did some good—& made many drunk" (Nightingale, Letter). It was also a recognizable and even safe role, despite tensions in colonial centers around the possibility of free black insurrection (Rappaport 4). Of course, the traces of this sexualized history are largely erased in the corrective histories about Seacole, except in the service of pointing out Nightingale's racism—thus reproducing respectability politics in antiracist discourse.

Mention of Seacole picked up in Jamaica in 1954, when the Jamaica Nurses Association headquarters was named after her. In 2005, in commemoration of the bicentennial of her birth, Jamaica, too, issued stamps in her honor. Unlike the reproduction of the National Gallery painting with Seacole in stately three-quarters profile wearing three Crimean War medals, one among several portraits including Virginia Woolf and Winston Churchill issued in commemoration of the Gallery itself, the four full-color Jamaican stamps attempt to contextualize Seacole's historical and institutional significance. The first engages Seacole's youthful education in natural medicine with its still life of herbs and a mortar and pestle, connecting her to Jamaican science and innovation and to Afro-based notions of Jamaican identity. The second shows a slightly older Seacole in the same yellow with an image of the residence hall at the University of the West Indies at Mona that is named after her, which consequently bestows Seacole with educational importance beyond her mere insertion into an already existing curriculum as the black Nightingale. The third stamp imagines an even older Seacole next to a scene from the Crimean War, with Seacole in bright dress attending to a wounded soldier. The fourth and final stamp in the series presents the same national portrait image of an elderly Seacole that is on the British stamp, with the relief image of a close-up of Seacole's purported medals from Turkey, France, and Britain for her service (the stamp's image also includes a 1990 medal for the Order of Merit from the Jamaican government). Though Seacole is still adopted and adapted into strategies of nationalism in these stamps, her

contextualization within institutional and world history is instructive as to the different claims being made on her image as a corrective token of multiculturalism in Britain versus a complex and multifaceted figure of professional skill, service, and continuing education in Jamaica. And although Seacole does not have a statue in National Heroes Park in Kingston, unlike Nanny of the Maroons, she is publicly memorialized as a Jamaican heroine who contributed to shaping the modern world, something akin to if not fully aligned with decolonized nationalism.

Seacole's 1857 narrative, as many contemporary critics note, also refuses to either disavow or embrace our contemporary vision of racial politics. Seacole positioned herself as a philanthropic agent to the British. In her memoir, she repeatedly describes both herself and her fellow Creoles administering aid to the British, as in the following passage:

> It was a terrible thing to see young people in the youth and bloom of life suddenly stricken down, not in battle with an enemy that threatened their country, but in vain contest with a climate that refused to adopt them. Indeed, the mother country pays a dear price for the possession of her colonies.
>
> I think all who are familiar with the West Indies will acknowledge that Nature has been favourable to strangers in a few respects, and that one of these has been in instilling into the hearts of the Creoles an affection for English people and an anxiety for their welfare, which shows itself warmest when they are sick and suffering. I can safely appeal on this point to any one who is acquainted with life in Jamaica. Another benefit has been conferred upon them by inclining the Creoles to practise the healing art, and inducing them to seek out the simple remedies which are available for the terrible diseases by which foreigners are attacked, and which are found growing under the same circumstances which produce the illness they minister to. So true is it that beside the nettle ever grows the cure for its sting. (58–59)

Seacole's text plays on the dual concepts of contagion theory and racialized climatic constitution discourse, suggesting that the British are

racially different, and hence vulnerable, in their colonial endeavors. In doing so, the narrative highlights how civic participation by colonialized subjects is a necessary part of imperial success.[16]

Seacole's memoir upends Gayatri Spivak's early descriptive critique of Western discourses of colonialization—"white men saving brown women from brown men" (287); indeed, the above passage shows a brown woman saving white male bodies (and a few indigenous peoples in New Grenada and Panama) from their own colonial desires. Seacole's narrative takes pains to characterize her good works, with words like "benevolent" and "service" cropping up in her lengthy appendix multiple times and with journalist W. H. Russell writing of her "singleness of heart, true charity, and Christian works" in his preface, "To the Reader" (5). This authenticating maneuver, similar to the white abolitionist introductions to slave narratives, instead of verifying truth (for in this case, Seacole and her story were already well known via newspaper accounts and the like), was an attempt to manage Seacole's story against charges of opportunism and toward women's philanthropy, a newly more accepted middle-class Victorian occupation.[17] Seacole's narrative is a story of getting out of Jamaica and to Crimea by any means necessary; she attempts to go through state channels, trying to join Nightingale's flock of nurses, and is rebuffed several times by many government-affiliated persons for a complicated mix of reasons including age, class, sexual propriety, and race, as intimated above in the quotation from Nightingale about the bad house. Seacole was forty-eight in 1853, and the nursing profession was attempting to rehabilitate its image as the providence of working-class, hard-drinking, morally loose women, and Seacole used to run hotels for soldiers that served alcohol and were associated with a long line of mixed-race women who were themselves evidence of sexual, and hence racial, impropriety. When her British resources were exhausted, she then turned to her hotelier experience to garner capital support for her trip. Commerce thus became Seacole's means of attaining access to soft rights of opportunity like transnational mobility and the right to work.

By relocating Seacole's celebrated adventures and racial subjectivity within the unstable border territories of empire's expansion, we can

see how imperialism opened and continues to open roles for women, including nonwhite women—roles that enable an expansion of rights outside of colonial and national laws.[18] Seacole constructs herself as a pioneer on the frontier of the New World, an entrepreneur in both business and public health. Of course, Seacole's narrative of entrepreneurship repeatedly speaks to what Gunning calls "the politics of white crisis"—the global catastrophes that are created by manifest destiny and the expansion of empire, such as the capital campaign to build the Panama railroad for which many laborers and speculators lost their lives, as people did for both the Gold Rush of this era in the Americas and the war over trade routes in the Crimea ("Traveling" 953). In *Wonderful Adventures* Seacole is open about her policy of charging the officers who could pay and ministering free to those of the lower ranks on the Crimean battlefield (132). Her alignment of capitalism and humanitarianism mimics the complexity of the war industry and the nationalist rhetorics that undergird the public face of war even today. I now turn to this relationship between empire and capital to trace the historical narratives of Seacole pinned to capital and cultural ambition across empire and her difficult inclusion into critiques of empire's racism.

III. The Self-Made Black Woman, or "Going down in history / that's my prize for it"

Building on Seacole's own narrative of herself as both savior and entrepreneur of empire, a second *Horrible Histories* clip, aired on 13 April 2012, further embodies the difficult balance between recuperating a complex and varied history of black women and the ever-present risk of fetishizing black women via that historical recovery. Set to a tune akin to early twenty-first-century R&B/pop music, this segment features the actress Dominique Moore as the heavily accented Seacole. In it, Seacole sings an R&B version of her tale, complete with choreography that features white male dancers costumed as Victorian British soldiers in Crimea. While the characterization of Seacole as an R&B/pop chanteuse points to a dangerously reductive stereotype of black women and their limited performative idioms (much as Seacole's exaggerated and anachronistic accent keys to an essentialist script of Jamaican

identity), I would also like to consider how this complicated staging of history starts to differ from the corrective histories this article describes above. The dancing British soldiers that surround Seacole in every scene of the music video-style clip mirror the support Seacole received in her day—not from well-meaning, abolitionist women of the nineteenth century but from the British troops and high-ranking male British royalty. This comfort in the company of men translates to the tone of Seacole's narrative, with its emphasis on her love of war, economic innovation, and self-reliance.[19] As the skit's Seacole narrates her journey as an "Independent Woman" (spliced with medical advice), the genre of the song begins to gel: Seacole becomes the hardscrabble equivalent to the romantically and financially self-sustaining heroines of contemporary R&B, a recognizable version of black womanhood that merges capital success, race, and gender. In this skit, she is marked as a pioneer for models of black women's representation that emphasize financial stability and self-reliance as political acts alongside more traditional models of collective racial politics, sexual autonomy, and ideals of social justice today.

The 1857 publication of *Wonderful Adventures* capped off a capital campaign for Seacole, who was left bankrupt by the sudden end of the War. Unable to rely on state or other institutional support, Seacole made public appeals to try to gain financial sovereignty on her return to England from Crimea. She wrote her memoir hastily in the months after the Crimean War; she aimed to fit the book into the growing body of journalistic, travel, and photographic accounts of the conflict.[20] But *Adventures* is both of its time and genre and more "idiosyncratic," as critic Sarah Salih notes (Introduction xxxii), commodifying the already circulating reputation of its "unique" author (xxxiv) as frank, flamboyant, and unsentimental except for her British patriotism—a persona that the book plays up in its original cover image. Dressed in militaristic garb, Seacole appealed directly to her constituency—her market of white British citizens in the colonial metropole, London, who were riding a wave of nationalism after the Crimean War—an imagined community forged through colonialist and imperialist endeavors and against colonial challenges and challengers.

Seacole's liminal racial, gendered, geographical, and sexualized position allowed her to experience such anomalous adventures and to have such an expansive enjoyment of some of empire's privileges—travel, money, fame, and leisure. Seacole was not, of course, alone as a black celebrity in Britain in this time period. Other examples include Sarah Bonetta Forbes, an African girl given to Queen Victoria as a gift in 1850 and subsequently adopted by the monarch (Gerzina 3), and Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass, who were welcomed by the Queen during their publicity tours in the UK as part of an attempt to highlight the culture of abolition and racial acceptance in Britain at the highest level of royal public relations (Hawthorne 319–20). At the same time that the British were vilifying colonial subjects in Jamaica and India in their newspapers after the Morant Bay Rebellion and the Indian Mutiny (Salih, Introduction xxvii), they were also consuming performances of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* adaptations and other entertainment around American enslavement and abolitionist sentiments (Brody 74–82). Writing about this racialized economy, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese suggests with refreshing honesty that in this period "[b]lack women write to be read by those who might influence the course of public events, might pay money for their books, or might authenticate them as authors" (72). If Seacole participated in this economy, she still stood as an icon not fully constructed or originating as an example of her race. Her publicity tour asked for recognition for her fame not as a representative of a sentimentally rendered group of people lacking rights but instead as a citizen of empire who needed, and had the right to claim, state protection.[21] Seacole's Victorian reception managed to inhabit these contradictory responses to race and to wriggle just outside of them—due to her age, widow status, Creole identification, and the historical rise of mass media.

Endorsed by various British societies of men and individual members of the royal family, Seacole nonetheless remained a free agent in terms of her own cultural strategies for recognition, if not her financial solvency. Seacole's much-reported exploits in Crimea are, as she considers them, "my one and only claim to interest the public" (131). Her express goal to become "a Crimean Heroine!" (76) is indelicate and

unvarnished. Victorian representations of Seacole are no less direct in their commitment to her fame; the *Times* reported on Seacole's 1857 Surrey Gardens fundraiser, of which there were four nights of sold-out performances:

> Notwithstanding that the charge for admission was quintupled, there was an immense concourse in the hall, and it need scarcely be said that the audience was of a character more 'exclusive' than is customary at the transpontine musical performances. . . . Mrs. Seacole sat in state in front of the centre gallery, supported by Lorde Rokeby on one side, by Lorde George Paget on the other, and surrounded by members of her committee. Few names were more familiar to members of the public during the late war than that of Mrs. Seacole. . . . At the end of both the first and second parts, the name of Mrs. Seacole was shouted by a thousand voices. The genial old lady rose from her place and smiled benignantly on the assembled multitude, amid a tremendous and continued cheering. Never did woman seem happier, and never was heart and kindly greeting bestowed upon a worthier object. (qtd. in Seacole [1984] 32).

As Salih suggests in an article on Seacole, she is both patron and patronized, her imagined textual community extended beyond the circulation of her already difficult-to-categorize autobiography into the public sphere of such newspapers and periodicals in Britain and Jamaica ("A Gallant Heart" 173).[22] Seacole managed her way into corrective history with what Sandra Paquet refers to as "an entirely public account of self" ("Enigma" 67). Void of most sentimental investments or private concerns such as marriage, *Wonderful Adventures* is now also part of an extra-literary conversation with the cartoons, portraits, and other circulating accounts of Seacole as British and Jamaican heroine, a campaign of sorts for Seacole's social, cultural, and economic recognition by the national body politic. Indeed, the media attention to the war, newly global thanks to print technology, made sure that "all the soldiers and sailors knew her," according to illustrator William Simpson (qtd. in Frederick 494). The journalist Russell, mentioned above, the *Times*

(who frequently reported on Seacole's fundraisers and the like), and the popular Victorian humor periodical *Punch*, whose poem about Seacole she reproduces nearly in full in her own text, all contributed to Seacole's widespread fame.

If fame and the money it could bring were the goals of Seacole's memoir and fundraising efforts, then corrective history is itself the prize for the fictional Seacole in the skit discussed at the beginning of this section: "Going down in history / that's my prize for it." The "it"—Seacole's difficult medical, social, and cultural labor—like the historical rehabilitation campaign imagined in the video described at the beginning of this article, is a question of public relations. By making the question of history explicit, *Horrible Histories* foregrounds the constructed nature of history, especially as it rests on the shoulders of so-called great figures in its most mundane and popular iterations. In this sense, Seacole and others are recruited into a racialized celebrity around various contemporary politics that construct, manage, and discipline difference. And though barely mentioned directly, Seacole's "berry-brown" face is, of course, part of why she is notable in the first place—her exceptional status as a woman of color in Crimea, along with her widow and working-class status, permitted her to exceed the boundaries of middle-class white womanhood, as she was able to labor in a way that few middle-class white women were allowed. Her exception from the bounds of respectability is what afforded her exceptional status in the time she lived and wrote as much as it is what systemically erased her from institutional memory for so long—and is what makes her an uneasy fit into corrective histories of empire that we envision today.

IV. Conclusion

As "only the historian of Spring Hill" (Seacole 107) in her own terms, and in Russell's preface, "a plain truth-speaking woman, who has lived an adventurous life amid scenes which have never yet found a historian among the actors on the stage where they passed" (5), Seacole marketed her highly specific experience into a public persona both of and ahead of her Victorian times, extending beyond British boundaries and

public sympathy toward sentimentalized depictions of race. Seacole, as "historian" of her time, documented the quotidian experience of Creole women hoteliers, New World transnational laborers, middle-class women seeking mobility through writing, nursing, and the discourse of philanthropy, foreign correspondents, and those serving in the burgeoning industry of modern warfare. The difficulty of "recruiting" Seacole into "a single canon or national cause" (Salih, Introduction xlii) highlights the struggle over her representation. The continued insistence on the significance of her image in multicultural Britain, as well as in the globalized economies of Jamaica and the Caribbean, foregrounds the significance of culture in shaping and claiming histories of race in the modern world.

Seacole skirts the boundaries of social appropriateness in her time and beyond, but her *Wonderful Adventures* are, in Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's words, "quite a bit queerer" than a narrative of either a Victorian mimic or Race Woman (184). "Queer," here, describes Seacole's narrative as not necessarily subversive in the contemporary progressive political sense but instead an alternative version of a contemporary immigrant narrative that traces the routes of privilege, racial difference, and worldly desire. In an April 2010 article in *The Economist*, "The Caribbean Brain Drain: Nursing a Grievance," Seacole is offered up as the foremother to a long line of Caribbean nurses who train at home only to work abroad. Citing a World Bank study on nursing shortages in the region due to low pay, the short piece scoffs at the World Health Organization's initiative to change recruiting practices to "strike a balance between the human right to health, and the right of health-care professionals to make their own career choices." While *The Economist*'s predictable and historically clueless conclusion is that the Caribbean needs to pony up more money for nurses to stay, the picture the World Bank study paints resonates with ambivalent reactions to Seacole, especially in the academy. With massive structural inequality stemming from the history of colonialism and imperialism and the creation of global markets in black labor, we must question the kind of histories we hold up as exemplary for black subjects, particularly for black women. More than *The Economist* could fathom, Seacole stands at this intersection of professional mobility,

personal desires, and our own critical and ethical desires to see the postcolonial world lean toward a justice that seems contradictory at best in the form of corrective histories.

Seacole's nationalist and pro-empire claims are hard for us as contemporary critics to swallow, while her race-related commitments seem minimal in her narrative; she condemns white American racism, but she expresses racial commitment as only incidental to her duties to empire. Her philanthropic claims toward white injured bodies and her desire for personal gain may seem crass to us, but they also expose the myth or ideal of fellow racial belonging as founded on an assumed collective history of racism alone, as well as an identification with its most vulnerable and violated populations. Seacole's race means she is taken up today as a tokenized sign of suffering and good—those qualities of racial injury and virtue that define cultural narratives of race and gender in the contemporary moment. Seacole's re-presentation leaves contemporary critics seeking ways to narrate stories of black women that account for the difficult affects of empire—ambition, desire for mobility, desire for capital success—in reckoning with the patriarchal constructions of women's positionalities in home communities and in the colonial centers.

Seacole's histories showcase the affective and material possibilities that empire potentially created for black women, in her era and today. Seacole embodies a history of ways the colonized world critically engaged and transformed the body politic of British citizenry with a range of adaptive practices. Centering histories of black women necessitates a recognition of the limits of current conceptual frames of inclusion, agency, and resistance in black postcolonial studies, as well as the possibilities of black women's particular desires and intense engagement with empire. Seacole was, in many ways, exceptional: she was a vanguard of black mobility through the global capital of colonial and war efforts who troubled the intersection of race, gender, and rights at a time of uneven global black bondage. What we make of the exception does not have to be corrective histories of individual triumph over structural racisms, or endless feminist competitions with the Nightingales of the world, but instead can be embedded histories of race and gender that imagine the

full complexity of black subjectivity and its innovative construction of and responses to empire.

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Notes

1 The fantastic history of Crimea by Figes tells the formative story of the key critical territory in the imperial age, but we would be remiss to not think also about its renewed significance in the twenty-first century as Russia attempts to wrest control of the territory from the Ukraine.

2 The 1994 Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers reprint is the most recognizable edition for stateside audiences, while the 1984 release from a very small publisher, Falling Wall Press, brought Seacole's story back to attention in the United Kingdom. Penguin now has an edition as well, from 2005. Critical literary readings of Seacole's work include scholarship by Fish, Forbes, Goudie ("Toward"), Kavalski, McGarrity, McMahon, Mercer, Nwankwo, O'Callaghan, Paquet (*Surfacing*), Paravisini-Gebert, Poon, A. Robinson, Simpson, and Tchaprazov.

3 See especially the work of Owens, Fuentes, and Finch, who build on the work of Hine, White, and Camp, as well as Marxist historian Johnson's influential article "On Agency."

4 This follows the work of black feminist geographer McKittrick in her 2006 *Demonic Grounds*, which revisits both the history and geography of empire through black women's texts.

5 This is not to conflate the two but to note how they are conflated in contemporary scholarship on and invocations of Seacole—how "Creole," as a distinct racial-regional identity in Jamaica and New Orleans, as well as other Americas locales, and as one linked to certain rights and discriminations, is collapsed into black identity for Seacole, demonstrating that hybridity remains a difficult concept not just for anti-black purposes of "one-drop" but also for antiracist politics that demand racial solidarity.

6 Scholarship on black women's travel narratives that further complicates these binary distinctions and is the base of my argument about narratives and histories of black women in empire that do not fit with corrective histories of "good" antiracist political subjects include: Gill and Blain, Fish, and Ferguson.

7 It is interesting to think of this through the lens of corrective feminist histories as well, where the arc seems to be that white feminists learn the error of their ways—something repeated in, for instance, podcasts about Seacole or the popular feminist comic strip representation of Seacole in Beaton's *Hark! A Vagrant*.

8 Her biographer, Jane Robinson, refutes the assumption that Seacole was an official recipient of these national medals, claiming that they appear to be miniatures and that there are no records of her being awarded (167).

9 These texts include but are not limited to Castor's *Famous People, Famous Lives: Mary Seacole*; Moorcroft and Magnusson's *Famous People: Mary Seacole, 1805–1881*; Williams' *Great Women Leaders: Mary Seacole*; Lynch's *The Life of Mary Seacole*; Layne's "The Yellow Doctress"; and the webpage "Famous People: Mary Seacole."

10 See Ferguson's book *The Reorder of Things* on this very phenomenon in a post-civil rights American context.

11 For more on the creation of racial classifications and the distinct construction of Creole society, see Brathwaite's *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica*. See Thompson's *Exiles at Home* on Creole subjectivity (though based in New Orleans) in the nineteenth century, as well as Goudie's *Creole America*. See Frederick for a discussion of racial distinction as related to Seacole directly, especially in Jamaica. For more on British relationships to race, see also Brody, Hall, Beasley, and Levine's *Prostitution*.

12 This is mentioned by Cooper and Holt regarding post-emancipation Jamaica, but there are very few English language studies of nineteenth-century black labor in Panama (such as the 1980 work by Lewis). There are, however, several studies of early twentieth-century free labor in Panama.

13 Her marriage to a white British officer, who was possibly an illegitimate son of Lord Nelson, occupies no more than a page of the narrative, with the proposal, marriage, and widowhood swiftly following one another. Likewise, free black unrest in Jamaica is never mentioned in the narrative. The presence of free black labor in Panama is not mentioned either, except for the presence and relative power of both freed and enslaved African American men, who receive praise and sympathy accordingly, sentiments that would likely be difficult to extend to those freed blacks in Jamaica who were resisting the system of indentured labor and lack of rights as British subjects at the time (which culminated in the Morant Bay Rebellion in 1865).

14 Thompson is speaking of Creole racial and social identity in nineteenth-century New Orleans, but her theorization of the racial category is still useful for thinking about circum-Caribbean racial identities.

15 See Gunning's "Traveling," Sharpe, Salih's *Representing*, Andrews, or Jane Robinson for biographical information on Seacole's mother, and Sharpe, Fluhr, Frederick, and Gunning's "Traveling" for the long history of Creole and black women as hotel keepers in Jamaica and the Caribbean, as well as the sexual

connotations of those roles. See also Brody for an explanation of Victorian-era negotiations with racial purity.

16 See Howell, Hall, Levine's *Empire*, and Salih's *Representing* for how empire produced racial distinctions and white racial pride even as the boundaries of British subjects expanded.

17 Melman makes this point in *Women's Orients*, as does Levine in *Feminist Lives* and *Victorian Feminism*. Levine is careful to distinguish the work of philanthropy from feminist occupations and activity of the Victorian era.

18 One might also think about Seacole's characterization of border law as it relates to race and economic standing.

19 Seacole repeatedly mentions her love of war, and her sorrow at its end, which she attributes to her "Scottish blood" (8).

20 The Crimean War is often described as the first modern war, particularly in its use of media technologies—photojournalism, front reporting, and war memoirs (by soldiers, nurses, cooks, officer's wives, etc.). See Keller's *The Ultimate Spectacle* or Figes' *The Crimean War* for two thorough accounts of the conflict's multimedia significance.

21 Regarding the role of publicity and claims to rights, I cite Arendt: "Only fame will eventually answer the repeated complaint of refugees of all social strata that nobody here knows who I am; and it is true that the chances of the famous refugee are improved just as a dog with a name has a better chance to survive than a stray dog who is just a dog in general" (418). The tension between rights (what one is owed by the state or world) and duties (what one owes to the state or world and to other citizens) is taken up frequently in human rights discourse, both in terms of the obligations of states and individuals.

22 Andrews begins his introduction in the Schomburg reprint of Seacole with the declaration that "[n]o autobiography by an Afro-American woman of the nineteenth century defies classification more that *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* (1857)" (xxvii). As much as it differs from either the spiritual and/or slave narratives of the nineteenth-century Americas, it also breaks from conventions of Crimean War memoirs, as it is part autobiography (beyond Crimea) and largely avoids battleground scenes that characterize most accounts. As critics have also noted, it further defies Victorian travel narrative conventions by refusing to copiously describe exoticized landscapes. Nonetheless, or perhaps in response to these various popular genres of the time, Seacole potentially engaged the wide readership of all three generic forms.

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