Other Mothers

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CHAPTER 9

“My Own Dear Sons”

Discursive Maternity and Proper British Bodies in Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands

DEIRDRE H. McMATHON

In the spring of 1854 the fifty-year-old freeborn black Jamaican and self-professed doctress Mary Seacole first heard of the British engagement in the Crimea; by the following winter Seacole had traveled from the Caribbean to Balaclava to become, in her words, “doctress, nurse and ‘mother”’ to the British soldiers.1 Underscored by her insistent claim that “unless I am allowed to tell the story of my life in my own way, I cannot tell it at all,” Seacole’s 1857 autobiography presented a challenge to Victorian England: the empire, she obliquely argues, not only includes me, it needs me (147). Her challenge, of course, lies in her skin color. By declaring a British, and at times an English identity, Seacole defies the supposed link between British superiority and Anglo-Saxon stock. In a deft manipulation of prevailing discourses of domesticity, Seacole’s self-inscription in Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands legitimizes this black dispossessed widow as a mother to the British soldiers in the Crimea. Seacole literally writes her way into the fabric of Englishness; moreover, her specific strategies of self-representation undermine one of the primary

foundations of British imperialism and British identity: the sanctity and stability of British motherhood.

For Victorians, the Crimean conflict was without doubt an imperial war. Allied British, French, and Ottoman forces spent only two years repelling Russian expansion into the Balkans (March 1854 to March 1856), but this relatively quick conflict was potholed with logistical faults and military blunders. Though provisions were supposed to be stockpiled in the Turkish city of Scutari, more than two hundred miles across the Black Sea, for the first year British troops in the Crimea lacked the most basic of supplies, including food, clothes, and even lint for bandages. There were very few wagons to transport the wounded and fewer surgeons to tend the injured. Cholera swept the camps. Reports of insufficient food, poor medical care, and incompetent leadership haunted the families and friends of the 21,000 British soldiers who died there, especially as three-quarters of the men had died from disease.\(^2\)

It has become painfully evident that the medical arrangements for the army in the East have been most inadequate, both as regards the provision against cholera and epidemic disease, and the attendance upon the wounded in battle. \(\ldots\) We greatly fear that, however brilliant the courage and glorious the achievements of our soldiers, it will have to be recorded as a reproach against the administrative authorities and the leaders of the expedition that inadequate provision had been made for the care of the sick and wounded. \((Lancet,\) October 21, 1854\)

It quickly became clear that the high death rate was as much the result of mismanagement as of battle, and that in battle the soldiers were gaining precious little ground. In effect, the imperial father figures of the British military and Parliament seemed to have failed, a failure captured for the first time in graphic daily newspaper accounts from the front.

As to the town [Balaclava] itself, words cannot describe its filth, its horrors, its hospitals, its burials. \(\ldots\) The dead, laid out as they died, were lying side by side with the living; and the latter presented a spectacle past all imagining. The commonest accessories of a hospital were wanting; there was not the least attention paid to decency or cleanliness; the stench is appalling; \(\ldots\) and, for all I could observe, these men died without the least effort being

\(^2\) British mortality figures for the war vary from 21,000 to 40,000, but even the most conservative sources estimate that only 3,000 to 5,000 British soldiers died directly from wounds received in battle. The rest died of disease, malnutrition, medical neglect or mistreatment, or lack of basic medical supplies. See the \textit{Times}, October 12, 1854.
made to save them. There they laid just as they were gently let down upon
the ground by the poor fellows, their comrades, who brought them on
their backs from the camps with the greatest tenderness, but who are not
allowed to remain with them. The sick appeared to be tended by the sick,
and the dying by the dying. (Russell 154)

British enthusiasm for the war was tempered not just by the loss of British
soldiers, whose casualties might be expected to follow from battle, but by
the possibility that soldiers could “die without the least effort being made
to save them.”

Into this chaotic landscape stepped Mary Seacole, determined to vol-
unteer her services to the British imperial war effort. Seacole traveled to
London in the autumn of 1854 to petition for inclusion in Florence Night-
ingale’s newly formed nursing corps, yet despite a great deal of medical
experience, especially in treating the cholera that was decimating British
troops, she was told there was no vacancy. Her skin color precluded her
work at the newly established British Hospital. Instead of returning to
Jamaica, Seacole booked transit to the Crimea to set up her own medi-
cal and mercantile establishment in Kadikoi, an outpost near Balaclava
that was much closer to the front than Nightingale’s hospital in Scutari.
Seacole’s aptly named “British Hotel” offered British soldiers reasonably
priced food, a comfortable meeting place, and Seacole’s expert medical
care, as well as access to whatever necessities “from an anchor down to a
needle” that the British chain of command was unable to procure (114).
There she diagnosed, operated on, and oversaw the recuperation or burial
of many “poor lads,” some of whom bore “names familiar to all England”
(126–27).

Seacole’s participation as a voluntary member of the British military
machine in the Crimea unsettles what may appear to be a commonplace
nineteenth-century equation of war (and imperialism) with masculine
endeavor; similarly, her postwar life in London suggests that the phenom-
enon of the colonial “return” to the metropole, most often identified as an
early- to mid-twentieth-century practice, was already under way during
the Victorian period. Though her very presence in these sites highlights
the instability of clear racial and gender boundaries, it is through the act
of authorship that Seacole makes manifest the ideological contradictions
under which she lived and produced her text.

Written after her return to London, during a period in which Sea-
cole faced ill health and financial ruin (in no small part because she had
destroyed her stock at the sudden end of the war rather than trade with
Russians), *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* attempts
to capitalize on the sympathy and fascination extended to those who had served in the Crimea. Seacole’s autobiography was a popular success, going through two printings within twelve months, a publication record which gestures, if only loosely, toward a measure of ideological affinity between author and audience. But the narrative authority established by conventions of autobiography—she was there, she saw the battles, she helped the soldiers—is complicated by Seacole’s race and sex. She is a woman, a “Creole” woman, traveling alone, fraternizing with British soldiers and profiting from war (1). To deflect any potential charges of illicit or parasitic behavior, Seacole both mediates and cements her authority through reference to the domestic, particularly the maternal. *Wonderful Adventures* presents Seacole as a “Crimean heroine,” British to the bone in her enthusiasm not only for Britain’s cause in the Crimea, but also for the care of the young British men whom she calls her “sons” (76, 127). Seacole justifies her position on the battlefield by framing her “adventures” as womanly duty. According to Seacole, the British war effort needs women, because “only women know how to soothe and bless” the desperately wounded (75). Thus Seacole reports that as soon as she heard of the war, her greatest wish was to use her medical skills, garnered from her own mother and from the Jamaican medical tradition, in service to Great Britain: “[W]hat delight should I not experience if I could be useful to my own ‘sons,’ suffering for a cause it was so glorious to fight and bleed for!” (75–76).

Seacole presents herself as English by choice, and by her own authority, as if her work in the Crimea were the proof rather than the cause of her essential Britishness (and as if Britishness by definition would accommodate multiple claims of identity, offering a kind of continuum on which to inscribe oneself). On this imperial continuum, Seacole implicitly argues, Englishness stands not just as a model, but as an attainable goal for the British colonial. Recent criticism has tended to ignore the radical import of Seacole’s self-fashioning, focusing instead on her apparent complicity with discourses of empire; readers at the time, however, seem to have been remarkably receptive to Seacole’s acts of self-definition.³ Her reception

³ Sandra Pouchet Paquet claims that *Wonderful Adventures* “reflects an enthusiastic acceptance of colonialism in the aftermath of slavery” (651), so much so that her memoirs “project [Seacole] as the lackey of male privilege and Empire” (655). According to Paquet, Seacole is saved from “unmediated parasitism” only by her sustained interest in medicine and travel (655). Amy Robinson describes Seacole’s assertion of Britishness as an “offensive affiliation” (554). William L. Andrews sees Seacole’s Britishness as a doomed venture, concluding his introduction to the Oxford edition of *Wonderful Adventures* by questioning if Seacole saw the “pathetic irony” of her “condition as a black woman trying assiduously to make a respectable place for herself in the Western scheme of things” (xxxiv).
thus suggests a significant level of malleability in midcentury conceptions of race, nation, empire, and appropriate gender roles.

**Domesticity at War:**
**Race and the Narration of Britishness**

In his insightful analysis of imperial femininity, Simon Gikandi argues that Seacole “can only be recognized as an English national by unconditionally espousing the imperial cause.” According to Gikandi, Seacole positions herself as English by combining a fervent and unconditional imperialism with “an archetypal mid-nineteenth-century trope” identified by Raymond Williams as “the new bourgeois ethic of self-making and self-help” (132). Though the ideals of diligence, industry, and self-denial that would later inform Samuel Smiles’s 1859 *Self-Help* certainly wind their way through the pages of *Wonderful Adventures*, Seacole’s investment in *narrative* control acts as the primary means by which she claims her English identity. Anticipating the rhetorical weapons others may use against her, Seacole preemptively introduces whatever may leave her marginal (be it her colonial origins, her skin color, her family history, her ambition, or her bankruptcy) in such a way as to insist upon a sense of solidarity with her readership. Seacole’s strategy of turning a potential weakness into a strength is especially evident in her negotiations of race and racial identity. For Seacole, race both is and is not somatic; is and is not a matter of biological inheritance; and most importantly, both is and is not possible to be dismissed, redefined, or transformed. On the first page of her autobiography Seacole explains, “I am a Creole, and have good Scotch blood coursing in my veins.” She continues: “My father was a soldier, of an old Scotch family,” thus positioning herself within a more conventionally (white) British rather than colonial lineage (1), yet though she occasionally lays claim to Scottish stereotypes of thrift or temper, she never mentions her father again. Neatly raising and then avoiding issues of racial ambiguity, intermarriage, and miscegenation, Seacole’s self-description depends upon the presence and erasure of a white father who literally embodies her claim to Britishness, but whose influence is so absolutely undescribed that he seems more like a necessary precondition of her narrative legitimacy than an active component of it.

The very ambiguity of the term “Creole” allows Seacole a range of racial self-representation, as do her varied terms of self-portraiture. She explains she is “only a little brown” (4), or “yellow” (78), but also describes herself as “dusky” or “a few shades duskier,” comparing herself implicitly
to a standard of white womanhood (4). However, while her range of racial self-representation is phrased with deliberate ambiguity, Seacole also affirms her allegiance to an African diasporic identity:

[I]f I have a little prejudice against our cousins across the Atlantic—and I do confess to a little—it is not unreasonable. I have a few shades of deeper brown upon my skin which shows me related—and I am proud of the relationship—to those poor mortals whom you once held enslaved, and whose bodies America still owns. And having this bond, and knowing what slavery is; having seen with my eyes and heard with my ears proof positive enough of its horrors—let others affect to doubt them if they will—is it surprising that I should be somewhat impatient of the airs of superiority which many Americans have endeavored to assume over me? (14)

Although framed as a criticism of American assumptions of white hegemony, this passage contains Seacole’s sole reference to Britain’s own history of slavery and, by extension, colonialism. Here she allows a moment of anger to seep into her otherwise conciliatory text. Instead of continuing to align herself with her British audience (as she does when referring to Americans as “our cousins across the Atlantic”), Seacole not only proclaims her pride at being of African descent but also turns a critical eye on Britain’s own history in the slave trade. (Her shift in pronouns alone, from “our cousins” to “those . . . whom you once held enslaved,” speaks to a fissure that Seacole chooses not to efface.) Indeed, her barbed insistence that she “knows what slavery is . . . let others affect to doubt [its horrors] if they will” suggests her rage and disdain for any apologists, be they American or British. In its defensive frame of pride in her African ancestry, this passage demonstrates Seacole’s awareness that her contemporaries might stress her racial difference at the expense of her patriotism and medical expertise.

Seacole’s paradoxical self-inscription—acknowledging a decidedly non-British identity that her autobiography diligently works against—depends upon the radical instability of race in nineteenth-century British culture.4 It is exactly because “race” could refer to an ethnic, chromatic, religious, continental, national, class, or sexual taxonomy that racial distinctions proffered a valuable means of political exclusion in which the norm of British subjecthood remained the province of white, upper- or middle-class Englishmen. However, Wonderful Adventures shows that

4 Many scholars have noted the indeterminacy of the term “race” in nineteenth-century British culture. See McClintock’s discussion of the “antinomies of race” (52–56). See also Bolt and Stepan.
British racial instability could be employed, as in the case of Mary Seacole, to include those whom it would usually marginalize. In fact, the bulk of *Wonderful Adventures* partakes in a narrative trajectory that executes subtle shifts in Seacole’s self-representation toward an ever more overt affiliation with a British, indeed, with an English, identity. The act of authorship alone enables Seacole to produce and protect a range of permeable subject positions, aligning her at once with Caribbean, African, and English identities, which she negotiates through reference to Britishness, itself a contested category, and motherhood, which is at once naturalized and exposed as a cultural construct.

Narrative control, “telling the story of [her] life in [her] own way,” allows Seacole to navigate the rocky waters of self-definition, but *Wonderful Adventures* is troubled by gaps, omissions, and moments of explicit unease which disrupt both the text and the connection with the British public that Seacole labors to construct. In this way, *Wonderful Adventures* not only works within and reproduces the abiding ideologies that inform Seacole’s act of authorship, it also exposes the jagged edges, or, as Mary Poovey would say, the “unevenness” of competing ideological imperatives. By attending to the warring signifying effects within *Wonderful Adventures*, and to the warring cultural work Seacole’s autobiography performs, it is possible to chart how sustaining logics of race and gender in Victorian England could be manipulated to articulate identities that imperialism would seem to deny out of hand. Rather than launching a large-scale critique of the racial and gender ideologies that seek to curtail blacks from authorship or women from travel, medicine, or war, Seacole simply inserts her experiences into existing discourses of patriotism and proper femininity. In doing so, she radically refigures domesticity so that it includes exactly that which it conventionally denies: profit, travel, medical training, professional recognition, and black British subjectivity.

Though domesticity’s power as an ideological construct is strong enough to legitimate, at least on a surface level, Seacole’s decidedly unconventional life story, significant gaps in the text point to tensions in existing discourses of race and femininity. Seacole’s self-representation as a woman called to aid “[her] fellow countrymen” transforms the “womanly art of healing” into an overt mercantile scheme, one that is charted clearly in her text, but given no credit as a motivation for her “motherhood” (75, 89). Seacole repeatedly emphasizes and attempts to legitimize her presence in Kadikoi as that of merchant and doctor. She does this without mention of the many inadequacies in British leadership; one of the striking omissions in Seacole’s text is the absence of descriptions of military mismanagement. Rather than accuse British authorities of incompetence, Seacole invokes the
highly gendered rhetoric of separate spheres to justify her refusal to comment on anything but her own establishment: “Mismanagement and privation there might have been, but my business was to make things right in my sphere, and whatever confusion and disorder existed elsewhere, comfort and order were always to be found at Spring Hill” (113). Her phrasing suggests a boundary Seacole refused to cross—as a woman and as a loyal supporter of the British army she would not criticize (and did not need to criticize) military authorities. Of course, correspondents like Thomas Chenery and W. H. Russell had already exposed severe inadequacies in the structure of the British army, and the reading public was well acquainted with its failures. In contrast, Seacole embraces silence, a code of conduct with dual cultural resonance as a mainstay of both military decorum and patriarchal custom.

In the context of the terrible anxieties raised by British military blunders, the “comfort and order” of the material goods Seacole supplies, though vital to the well-being of British soldiers, fade in comparison with the ideological work performed by her bold assertion that, at least in her enclave in Spring Hill and in her meager but pointedly named “British Hotel,” proper British conduct was maintained in the midst of the chaos of war. Government officials may have refused her help, and in doing so refused to acknowledge her talents, training, and the “naturalness” (78) of a mother’s offer to tend to her sons (or of a subject’s desire to support her nation), but in merging maternal care with patriotism as a higher moral order, Seacole insists that her call to “serve” transcended their racism: Britain needed her help, even if the authorities were blinded by their prejudice, and she was determined to give it (76, 80).

In direct contradiction to the prevailing stereotype of the drunken, incompetent nurse, Seacole presents herself as a trained and dedicated doc­tress, cloaked in maternal care and discipline. She explains that she not only supplied British soldiers with meat, tea, coffee, linens, medicines, fruit, wine, and doctoring at the British Hotel, but also enforced a strict code of behavior at her establishment: “neither permit[ting] drunkenness among the men nor gambling among the officers” (145). Far from scrambling in the dirt, without morale or effective leadership, as other reports suggested, the soldiers at the British Hotel admirably withstood hardship, in part because Mother Seacole demanded that they do so. In shame­less paralepsis, Wonderful Adventures makes clear that the soldiers received the support they needed not from official channels, but from Seacole herself. By cooking, procuring supplies, dispensing medicine, stitching wounds, and acting as an amanuensis for men too ill to write, Seacole was able to provide what she terms “home comforts” and “little home tokens”
desperately needed on the front (185). But though she incorporates frequent mention of her medical skills and business acumen, these accomplishments are subsumed into a framework of womanly duty.

Although I did not hesitate to charge [a sick soldier] with the value of the necessities I took him, he was thankful enough to be able to purchase them. . . . Don’t you think, reader, if you were lying, . . . thousands of miles from mother, wife or sister, . . . and thinking regretfully of that English home where nothing that could minister to your great need would be left untried—don’t you think you would welcome the familiar figure of a stout lady[?] . . . I tell you, reader, I have seen many a bold fellow’s eyes moisten at such a season, when a woman’s voice and a woman’s care have brought to their minds recollections of those happy English homes which some of them never saw again. (125–27; emphasis in original)

Seacole addresses her readers as if in direct response to any number of tacit accusations, all of which can be forestalled through a single strategy. Though she rather baldly mentions that “she did not hesitate to charge” the soldier for food and medicine, her identity here is not that of a merchant engaged in a business transaction. Instead, she positions herself as a figure of womanly care, and moreover, as a reminder of the homes and families these men had left behind.

Framing her narrative through the rubrics of sentimentality, the bread, breakfasts, and conviviality of the British Hotel are suggestive of domestic ritual, of a quotidian interest in food and friendship that remains in marked contrast to the war just beyond the hotel’s walls. With constant disjuncture in her descriptions of the Crimea, vacillating between the utter devastation caused by the conflict and the men’s own heart-warming camaraderie, Seacole invokes both the emotional needs of the troops and the cultural construction of “home” as sacred space, as the very reason for which nations go to war. In doing so, she is able not merely to align herself with the women left in England, but literally to embody English femininity and to stand as a symbol of the home, hearth, and empire for which England was supposedly fighting. Consider her descriptions of dying soldiers, comforted by the “touch of a woman’s hand”:

[B]ending over a poor fellow whose senses had quite gone, and, I fear, would never return to him in this world, he took me for his wife, and calling me “Mary, Mary,” many times, asked me how he got home so quickly, and why he did not see the children; and said he was sure he should soon get better now. Poor fellow! I could not undeceive him. I think the fancy
happily caused by the touch of a woman’s hand soothed his dying hour; for I do not fancy he could have lived to reach Scutari. I never knew it for certain, but I always felt certain that he would never wake from that dream of home in this world. (99)

Here Seacole’s medical skills are not as important as her sex: standing in for his “Mary,” her very presence prompts the dying soldier’s “dream of home in this world.” This “fancy,” Seacole implies, eased the man’s passage from this world to the next. Obviously, such a description offers reassurance and solace not to the troops, but to Seacole’s readership. Beneath Wonderful Adventures is the promise that the men in the Crimea thought constantly of their homes and loved ones; that they behaved in ways fitting for representatives of the Crown; and, moreover, that at least some soldiers died peacefully, if only under the delusion that they had been reunited with their families.

Sentimentality buoys Seacole’s descriptions of the soldiers and their day-to-day lives on the front. She would comfort the wounded awaiting transport to Scutari, for example, with a taste of lemonade and simple sponge cake, because “they all liked the cake, poor fellows, better than anything else: perhaps because it tasted of ‘home’” (101). In direct address, she explains further to her “gentle reader” that she endeavored to bring the soldiers “a taste of home” on rice pudding day, adding that if her readers had traveled to the British Hotel during the war, they, too, might well have shared some rice pudding, or have “stumbled upon something curried, or upon a good Irish stew, nice and hot, with plenty of onions and potatoes, or upon some capital meat pies” (138, 140), fare in contrast with most descriptions of provisions in the camps. References to home—to London, to England, and especially to the families the soldiers had left behind—run consistently throughout Seacole’s descriptions of life (and death) in the British camp. Like World War I, the Siege of Sebastopol required extensive trenches, and those guarding the trenches at night often suffered sneak attacks and sniper fire. Seacole explains it was “very usual” for young officers ordered to the trenches to stop by the British Hotel to “shake me by the hand at parting, and sometimes . . . say: ‘You see, Mrs. Seacole, I can’t say good-bye to the dear ones at home, so I’ll bid you good-bye for them. Perhaps you’ll see them some day, and if the Russians should knock me over, mother, just tell them I thought of them all, will you?’” (152).

Such passages succeed in painting a piteous scene (and in positioning Seacole as symbol of home and maternal care) only if they pull at the readers’ heartstrings. The scene’s first layer of sentimentality lies in the recog-
nition, shared by Seacole and the soldiers, that each good-bye could be a final farewell, but the sense of loss and tragedy is further heightened for the readers of *Wonderful Adventures* by the certain knowledge that so many of the British soldiers serving in the Crimea indeed did not return “to the dear ones at home.” Seacole acts as witness, participant, and chronicler, documenting the war with an eye for British heroism; significantly, it is her words as much as her actions, her descriptions of care and affection for the soldiers, that engender affective bonds between author and audience. Seacole’s life story becomes a tale of British imperial virtue made manifest by the mourning, pride, and patriotism she and her readers share.

To summarize the work of Nancy Armstrong, Jane Tompkins, and others, sentimental literature engenders its affective response by evoking a set of shared symbols and values, but far from being merely a reaffirmation of community standards, the visceral reactions engendered by the text open the possibility of an active refashioning of value structures—of what can and must be valued as well as how it should be valued. To rephrase, using Jane Tompkins’s terms, sentimental literature is always already a “political enterprise, halfway between sermon and social theory” (126). The pathos of the battlefield shadows the second half of Seacole’s autobiography, but the psychological, physical, and financial costs of war consistently remain subordinated to the narrative of maternal care on which so much of the affective response to *Wonderful Adventures* depends. In this context, Seacole’s imperial zeal and descriptions of dying soldiers function in tandem to support her larger goal of reconstituting the British family, with herself at its center. Throughout Seacole’s text, however, the urgency of her repetitions, her near constant references to her role as caregiver, and her frequent nostalgic gestures toward “those happy English homes” suggest authorial anxiety; her autobiography must not only provide a marketable record of her experiences as a traveler, merchant, and doctor, but also create a valid space for Mary Seacole in the London to which she had returned. In the words of Simon Gikandi, “writing *Wonderful Adventures* is [Seacole’s] ultimate attempt to claim her Englishness” (127). She succeeds at claiming Britishness, even Englishness, but at great cost. Her attempt is fraught, I argue, because the rubrics on which her text relies—patriotism, domesticity, proper femininity, and, most specifically, motherhood—simultaneously secure and undermine her ability to inscribe herself as a subject within Victorian culture.

Seacole’s dependence on the rhetoric of maternity emblematizes the double-edged sword with which she asserts her authorship. Consider her analogy of war with childhood illness: “I used to think [battle] was like having a large family of children ill with fever, and dreading to hear which
one had passed away in the night” (152). By framing her narrative in the language of maternal care, Seacole creates a power differential favoring herself as doctor/mother and infantilizing the (implicitly white) male British soldiers whom she calls her “boys” (153) and “sons” (152). But the role of mother is not necessarily liberatory, and is especially problematic for women deemed racial others. It could certainly be argued that the success of Seacole’s autobiography was due at least in part to her audience’s comfort with the Mami/mammy figure of the Caribbean and American South. While this may well be true, Seacole differs from the stereotype of the mammy (the faithful black female—often slave—retainer, nurse, and mother substitute) in her control of her own narrative and in her insistence that she was an entrepreneur, a talented “doctress,” and a hotelier paid for her efforts and recognized for her abilities. Herein lies the rub: in order to legitimize her presence and activities in the Crimea, Seacole cannot rely merely on her roles as patriot, merchant, or physician—these roles must be mediated through reference to maternity and domesticity. But should Seacole situate herself solely within the realm of domesticity, she runs the risk that her race and colonial background will position her in the Caribbean and American tradition of the dispossessed, subservient mammy, rather than as an English mother or as a British subject integral to the empire.

Discursive Maternity

In light of Seacole’s repeated claim to the profession of “doctress,” the critical trend to see Seacole as a self-appointed mammy reduces her actions and narrative to a subject position she does not fit. Rather than situating (and limiting) Seacole within the role of mammy or substitute white mother, I think it useful to pause for a moment and consider the repercussions of her claim to maternity. As critics as varied as Adrienne Rich, Dorothy Dinnerstein, and Sara Ruddick have shown, motherhood, even in its strictest sense, functions as an institution as well as a biological phenomenon, and as such motherhood serves inherently political functions. This occurs on at least three levels. First, there is a long tradition in which women are given value through their reproductive capacity. Second, children are born not only into families, but also into preexisting positions within dominant power structures of race, gender, and class. To a significant extent, women’s

5 Amy Robinson describes Seacole as “always already a derivative of the ‘real’ white mother” (547). Simon Gikandi gives a more nuanced reading of Wonderful Adventures, but does not question that Seacole is mimicking motherhood; “for these lonely soldiers, she is ‘Mami’—the surrogate mother” (140).
reproductive labor participates in the long-term maintenance of social institutions—including but not limited to class hierarchies, normative gender roles, the concentration of wealth though inheritance, and nationalism itself. Finally, as many feminist theorists have noted, motherhood as an institution regularly takes precedence over the experience of having or raising a child, often with disciplinary consequences for actual women. The supposedly timeless (i.e., “natural”) maternal ideals of tenderness, self-sacrifice, and “instinct” rather than intellect, as well as the expectation that the mother holds primary responsibility for her offspring’s safety, well-being, and growth, confer iconic status upon women as guardians of culture and tradition as well as of children. These same ideals, however, validate a very conservative and repressive vision of both women and the family—at its most extreme, mothers are seen as conduits of the social order rather than as citizens in their own right. Legal theorist Martha Fineman explains: “Motherhood has always been, and continues to be, a colonized concept—an event physically practiced and experienced by women but occupied, defined and given content and value by the core concepts of patriarchal ideology” (217).

To this investigation of motherhood as a socially constructed, ideologically laden phenomenon with significant semiotic play, I would extend the arguments of theorists like Hortense Spillers, Jennifer DeVere Brody, and Laura Doyle to insist that the compulsion to naturalize motherhood, to simplify motherhood as a resolutely gendered but apolitical experience, to deny the ideological underpinnings of what constitutes maternity itself, much less what constitutes a “good” or “bad” mother, conceals the extent to which women are positioned as sites of racial anxieties for the culture at large. Indeed, it is exactly because race is usually portrayed as “natural,” biological inheritance, thus as necessarily mediated through the female body, that race and sex stand as mutually constitutive categories, requiring each other but producing a dizzying variation in their dynamics. Women’s bodies are deemed unruly, and subject to scrutiny and control, due to the fact that their reproductive capacity both continues and threatens hierarchies of race, class, and sex. The implicit threat of reproduction—men cannot reproduce without women, but for any particular child, men do not have the certain knowledge of paternity that women perforce have of maternity—means that anxieties about race are always also anxieties about sex, female autonomy, and the control of female bodies and desires. In this way, the mother figure in particular serves not only as a point of access to cultural and racial identity, but also as an end limit of transparent sexuality. Controlling, marking, limiting, or celebrating certain maternal bodies serves to support (or proscribe) individual women’s sexual activity;
policing individual women, however, functions simultaneously to inscribe value upon the children produced, thus reinforcing the political viability and cultural reproduction of various groups. As Laura Doyle forcefully argues, the mother acts as a “cultural vehicle for fixing, ranking, and subduing groups and bodies” (4).

In its anxieties about station, birthright, and race, Victorian society recognized the ideological effects of motherhood and reproduction, though this recognition typically remained cloaked behind the idealization of mothers and maternity. Indeed, for many midcentury Victorians maternity was invested with sociopolitical importance: “On the maternal bosom the mind of nations repose; their manners, prejudices, and virtues,—in a word, the civilization of the human race all depend upon maternal influence” (Martin 47). Here civilization itself rests on mothers’ rather than on fathers’ shoulders, a worldview which makes Seacole’s claim to maternity, or to be more precise, her self-representation as a mother to British soldiers, effectively an assertion of her own status not only as a standard bearer of British virtue, but also (and more implicitly) as a model of the “civilized,” domesticated colonial subject. Put another way, this passage suggests that “maternal influence” works to “civilize” children and nations, as if traditions and mores are transmitted along with breast milk (a dangerous claim, but one entrenched in nineteenth-century notions of the family). In contrast, Seacole’s rhetoric of maternity suggests that in the Victorian imagination unruly or transgressive female bodies can be made intelligible, even commendable, through reference to a very powerful ideal of femininity that understands women as the sites as well as the conduits of material and cultural reproduction. Of course, not just any form of maternity will do. At issue is not reproduction per se, but the replication and care of dominant discourses that validate or make vulnerable subjects under their sway. For in fact, the idealization of maternity is invested in the reproduction of ideology rather than children—safeguarding norms and ideas, including the boundaries of identity.

At once discursive and material, the nexus of woman/culture/nation is consistently centered on the female body, so much so that control of women’s bodies (in nineteenth-century debates about women’s legal status, education, employment, and access to the professions) was portrayed as a matter of public concern, just as knowledge about a woman’s body (what she really is in terms of class, race, religion, or morality; with whom she has or has not had intercourse) implied knowledge about her offspring. It is significant, then, that Wonderful Adventures works to erase Seacole’s sexuality. Her autobiography goes to great lengths to establish Seacole as an older, properly circumspect, and certainly nonprocreative woman. With the
specter of miscegenation haunting the pages of her text, Mother Seacole invests herself in a decidedly discursive maternity, one that need not trouble her readers’ sexual mores (or anxieties about racial identity). Maternity, or rather the invocation of maternity, *redefines* Seacole’s body, transgressive though she was in skin color, place of origin, occupation, and location; through her rendition of near-idyllic domestic order in the Crimea, her sexual body dissolves into a sanitized narrative in which a mother struggles to maintain a safe home for her sons.

Paradoxically, discursive maternity desexualizes Seacole even while emphasizing her femaleness, lending respectability to her presence among the many men with whom she constructs long-standing, intimate, but discursive bonds of kinship. As her body is effaced through text, the threat of her racial ambiguity fades, or rather, the racial threat of her body’s reproductive capacity fades. This is no small point, especially when considering Seacole’s near silence on the extent to which British slavery is implicated not only in the region in which she spent the first fifty years of her life, but in the imperial history she seeks to support. Motherhood and slavery, it seems, cannot coexist, at least not in a British autobiography. As Hortense Spillers cogently argues, maternity functions with particular signifying power in slave societies: while fatherhood may be contested, motherhood is most often known, and should the mother be a slave in the Americas, the child usually inherits her legal status. Thus in the reproductive politics of slavery, motherhood is dangerous, with the act of birth conferring *illegitimacy* and disenfranchisement on one’s children, and with children functioning as collateral for their parents’ goodwill.

In telling contrast, Seacole attempts to legitimize both herself and the imperial project by creating a discursive space in which she can be mother to British *soldiers*, and hence a vital component in the propagation and maintenance of Britain’s imperial power. In an inversion of conventional patterns of inheritance and identity, the Britishness of her soldier-sons lends a significant measure of legitimacy to Seacole as British herself. Seizing maternity grants Seacole one of the highest powers afforded women, a form of acceptable agency that naturalizes her work in the public sphere as a necessary outgrowth of her need to protect and nurture those dependent upon her. The benefits of discursive maternity allow Mother Seacole to be autonomous and unmarried without censure; indeed, her autonomy depends upon sexual probity, as her body’s dual threats of sex and skin color remain constrained by the collective fiction of her motherhood. In this way, discursive maternity functions as an ideological fail-safe, as an office without material basis that works if and only if there is a public recognition of its constructedness. In Seacole’s case, however, discursive
maternity was based on the ugly material facts of war. Tending the bodies of men who were dying so far from home, Seacole’s maternity exceeded its discursive limitations by operating on a literally somatic level: her efforts saved British lives. To some extent, then, Seacole’s rhetoric of motherhood, complete with affection, grief, and patriotism, gained a level of authenticity that belied its constructed status. Seacole’s successful renegotiation of identity, her self-inscription not only as a British mother, but as a British mother to soldier-sons, exposes just how constructed even the most “natural” web of relations (the family) can be.

Strikingly, the London popular press seemed to accept Seacole’s claim to maternity and Britishness, even Englishness. Journals ranging from *Punch* to the *Illustrated London News* to the illustrious *Times* gave column space to her bankruptcy and urged readers to send subscriptions to the fund established in her name. According to the May 30, 1857, edition of *Punch*, for example, both “the honour of the British army and the generosity of the British public” will be “disgraced” if sufficient funds are not raised for the “genuine English” Seacole (221). As a British—and at times an English—mother, Seacole can rally the “troops” at home, calling in *Wonderful Adventures* for her postwar readers to continue to endorse the conventional imperial ideology that Britain acts as a mighty civilizing force, spreading its good values across the globe. Not coincidentally, they can show their fervor for empire by donating to the subscription in honor of her own good work. The success of her autobiography (and thus the likelihood that she would rise out of debt) depended on the Victorian public’s willingness to embrace the vision of imperial domesticity (a form of global politics humanized) she provides. The implications are far-reaching: imperial ideology is thus *reproduced* through the body (her actions, the intimate yet asexual contact and care she gave the soldiers) and the text (including the somatic charge gained from its rhetoric of motherhood) of this black colonial woman writing about her work on the battlefield. What *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* offers, then, is a vision of empire that explicitly connects English, Irish, and Scottish homes with battles abroad, and moreover, a vision that not only includes women at the forefront of imperial effort, but also suggests a new litmus test for Britishness: cultural reproduction.

This new framework for Britishness is only possible though Seacole’s careful manipulation of her historical and cultural circumstances, a manipulation which affects both the structure and content of *Wonderful Adventures*. Though freeborn herself, Mary Seacole gained maturity in a Caribbean still dominated by slavery. In a telling omission, save for the passing remark quoted earlier, Seacole describes neither England’s
nor Jamaica’s participation in the slave trade, despite the fact that during much of her adulthood black slaves constituted 78 percent of Jamaica’s population, whereas only 13 percent of the total population were free people of color such as herself. Distinctions of color, class, education, and civil rights—the colonial inheritance of slavery—similarly remain unremarked, though turmoil over the property rights of “coloured creoles” such as herself would lead to the Morant Bay Massacre only eight years after the writing of Wonderful Adventures. Even details of her personal life are conspicuously absent from her autobiography. As if to position herself as always already British, untainted by the violence of self-inscription, Wonderful Adventures excises almost all mention of Seacole’s friendships or family. Seacole glosses over discussion of her roots in Jamaica, and in the space of a single paragraph she meets, marries, nurses, and buries Mr. Seacole, who had been “very delicate” (5). Thus she establishes her credentials as a respectable widow, a woman who could be a legitimate mother, while also declaring her freedom to travel the globe. “Mother Seacole” cannot legitimate her claim to be a constitutive member of the British family if she recognizes that the British Empire has historically excluded and exploited people of color. Thus her autobiography enacts a dual revision of history: her own colonial past is given short shrift even as the British imperium is whitewashed into a narrative without slavery or systemic racial prejudice.

“My own dear sons”: Enlarging the Family Circle

After Sebastopol fell on September 12, 1855, the Allies considered themselves the victors in the conflict and soon began negotiations for an armistice with Russia. Seacole admits a bifurcated response to the prospect of peace. On the one hand, the cessation of conflict signaled a victory for the British, albeit a limited one. For Seacole, however, the war’s end meant

6 Seacole does not mention even the quickly suppressed Jamaican slave insurrections of December 1831 and January 1832, instead reserving her criticism for the “yankee” institution of American slavery (11, 14, 51–53, 58). For Jamaican population statistics, see Bleby and Semmel.

7 The Morant Bay Rebellion began in October 1865 with agitation over the civil rights of black and “coloured creole” men. A month later, four hundred black Jamaicans were dead, including free “coloured creole” citizens like George W. Gordon, landowner, minister, and member of Jamaica’s legislature, who, although he never participated in the riots, was arrested, court-martialed, convicted, and hanged for leading the insurrection. See Semmel.

8 British troops had not given a good showing on the Redan, the site of the last major battle heading to the fall of Sebastopol, so much so that French troops took the lead in
the dismantling of all she had built: the closing of her store guaranteed bankruptcy; regimental redistribution would send her sons to the far corners of the empire; and, perhaps most importantly, peace negated her position as “doctress, nurse and mother” to the troops. Her ambivalence about the end of the war is evident in her declaration that “I was very glad to hear of peace, also, although it must have been apparent to everyone that it would cause our [the British Hotel’s] ruin” (189). Far from being celebratory, her tone here is rather pensive, deflecting onto others the knowledge that peace would be another form of destruction for her.

Taken in aggregate with her repeated identifications with Englishness cited above, Seacole’s final chapter suggests a level of anxiety not limited to her dire financial situation, though, as Barbara Weiss argues, bankruptcy carried considerable emotional freight for Victorians. Indeed, the sharp increase in mentions of “home,” “friends,” and “the comrades left behind” (found on almost every page of the final chapter) indicates incongruity: the seat of war is home to Mother Seacole and every step toward England is a step closer to the dissolution of her “family” (and perhaps of her Englishness). She explains:

[All this going home seemed strange and somewhat sad, and sometimes I felt that I could not sympathise with the glad faces and happy hearts of those who were looking forward to the delights of home. . . . Now and then we would see a lounging with a blank face, taking no interest in the bustle of departure, and with him I acknowledged to have more fellow-feeling than with the others, for he, as well as I, clearly had no home to go to. (192)

Seacole fails to mention Jamaica or her sister who lived in Kingston, as if her efforts on the front precluded any possibility of colonial return. Her future, it seems, lies in England, perhaps because her service to the British war effort had brought her such happiness and contentment. Peace, on the other hand, is unsettling and “somewhat sad.” This passage seeks to frame the end of the Crimean War under a new rubric of sentimentality, one that aligns Seacole with the rootless veteran even while emphasizing her vulnerability as a woman in the process of losing her home and vocation. Seacole’s twofold bid for sympathy as a servant of the crown and as an older woman in need of its protection acts as the last in a long chain of figurative strategies that have enabled her to stand at once as soldier, mother, creole, merchant, doctress, and Englishwoman. The final pages of her text hint capturing the Russian stronghold, a blow to British pride. No major battles occurred after the fall of Sebastopol; the peace treaty was signed on March 30, 1856.
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at her recognition that her efforts might have been in vain, that England might reject her as quickly as the War Office had done before.

Seacole’s blunt revelation that she has no home to go to after the war works to reaffirm the British Hotel as her true home, a site of cultural plasticity in which the financial and filial obligations incurred by the British soldiers she tended, some of whom failed to pay her as a result of their own losses during the war, could be transferred onto the shoulders of her readers. Implicit in her discussion of her uncertain circumstances is the reminder that any lack of recognition of her maternal status on England’s part would not only reduce her to penury, but would dishonor the Crimean military family she had willed and narrated into existence. Thus, building from the bonds of sympathy she earlier had forged between author and audience, Seacole rhetorically enlarges her familial circle from the troops stationed in the Crimea to the extended family of her readers. Surely they, having read her Wonderful Adventures, will recognize her efforts and her Englishness; surely they will give her a measure of support (not charity), just as she had supported England in her hour of need. This radically refigured and mutually sustaining vision of the British family is contingent upon Seacole’s discursive maternity. England and the British Empire must return her affection and loyalty, if only because the logic of domesticity and familial bonds demands that response: it would be “unnatural” for the British to turn their backs on Seacole now.

What Wonderful Adventures offers, then, is an inside (and carefully verified) look at the Crimean War, one that focuses less on battle than on British strength and gallantry, even in the face of death. Seacole’s readers see her as a British heroine, but also, and more importantly, they see their sons as heroes and Seacole’s “British Hotel” as a small piece of England. In this way, Seacole creates what Ian Baucom, borrowing a term from French philosopher Pierre Nora, calls a “lieu de mémoire.” Baucom argues that certain places are invested—even enshrined—in our personal or national consciousness. These places, “textual, monumental or topographic,” stand for a “need to stop time,” and function as rallying points for a collective identity (19). Seacole’s intervention into national discourses about the Crimea “stops time,” carving out a secure space that contradicts reports of British failure and suffering. To the British public, hungry for stories of the war but horrified by the newspaper reports they had read, Wonderful Adventures furnishes a kinder, gentler account of the Crimea in which war functions as a backdrop to a narrative of domestic and imperial success. In her narrative, and only through her narrative, the “British Hotel” remains a safe harbor for the still-mourned “boys” lost in the war. There, in the pages of her text, British soldiers are tended by their “Mother,” given food
and proper care, and are helped back to England, if only in the form of their letters.

In effect, Seacole transforms domesticity and maternal care into commodities that she sold to the British soldiers; similarly, her autobiography transforms and commodifies her experiences into narrative, which she sold to the British public. Seacole, faced with return to the inflexible racial hierarchies of London (where she was not seen as a doctress and where she had difficulty finding employment), responds by narrating a frontline account in which she is accepted as a guardian of British values away from home. Seacole doesn’t attempt to deconstruct the national and racial politics of the Crimean War. Instead, she celebrates her participation in the British imperial project in the Near East. But by successfully aligning herself with the mothers waiting in England, even as her text reveals the discursive props, entrepreneurial outlines, and shaky narrative walls of its vision of domesticity, Seacole quietly calls into question the ways motherhood (and the motherland) are constructed. As far as Seacole is concerned, her sons who died at Balaclava were no more British than she. British identity, her autobiography hints, is not “natural” or fixed: its origins lie in the stories one tells oneself, in the ideologies one embraces, not in lineage, skin color, or place of birth. That the reception of her autobiography was so enthusiastic, especially within the cultural milieu whose standards of inclusion it implicitly challenges, suggests a hitherto unrecognized flexibility in popular definitions of Britishness. Despite her celebrity, however, Seacole’s quick erasure from the historical record suggests the extent and power of normative standards of nineteenth-century British citizenship. If Seacole’s autobiography managed to effect an exception to these standards, it was a temporary one. As the generation who mourned the Crimea faded away, so did the dark-skinned Seacole’s heroic status. She became expendable, while the pale, chaste figure of Florence Nightingale retained her purchase on British history.

**Works Cited**


