The unlikely heroines of their own travel narratives, Amy Morris Bradley and Nancy Prince recount long and difficult journeys across the Atlantic and through the Caribbean, riding mules and falling into sinkholes, suffering seasickness and evading kidnappers. Bradley travels from Maine to San Juan, Costa Rica, in 1853, remaining in the city for four years before returning to the States. Her unpublished travel diary records the steamship journey that leaves her prostrate with seasickness, her dizzying ride on mule back along the treacherous cliffs of the overland route across the Isthmus of Panama, and her ingenuity in starting a life and business after the governess position she has come for leaves her dissatisfied and without the money to return home. Prince’s Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Nancy Prince, first published in 1850, documents the unprecedented extensive travel of a free black woman, chronicling her trip from New England to St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1824, her nine-year residence as the new wife of...
a member of the Russian court, her struggles after her husband’s death and return to the United States, and her subsequent missionary travels to newly emancipated Jamaica in the 1840s.

Lilian Leland’s world travels (1884–86) begin sixty years after Prince embarks for St. Petersburg and demonstrate the seismic shift in women’s access to and participation in travel that occurs over the course of the century. Comparing Leland’s journey and writing with Bradley’s and Prince’s dramatizes the difference between travel undertaken from economic or social necessity and the privileged experience of tourism, as well as between travel writing that protests social and economic injustice and travelogues that catalog the benefits of wealth. The scope of Leland’s travels are impressive, as the preface to her travel text summarizes, “a journey which carried her around the world, to many lands and on many seas, from Cape Horn to the North Cape and from the Rocky Mountains to the Himalayas; but little less than sixty thousand miles in distance and covering a period of about two years” (vii). However, as the epigraph above suggests, travel, even an adventurous journey undertaken by a young woman “without escort or protection” (vii), was a commodity purchased with middle-class wealth rather than with “courage.”

Women gained more and more access to tourism as technological advances in travel—particularly steamships, railroads, and highways—became available early in the 1820s and developed in speed, luxury, and safety as the century progressed. Leland goes so far as to lament the increased ease and convenience of travel, longing instead for discomfort, adventure, and camel rides:

To-day we traverse a continent in a few days, sitting comfortably in luxuriously fitted cars, where she [Ida Pfeiffer, Leland’s traveling female forebear and role model] spent tedious weeks plodding wearily across burning plains and over snowy ranges. Drawn by the deliberate water buffalo, borne by the opinionated donkey, the positive mule, the stately camel, or in palanquin by human hands, she traversed deserts and climbed mountains. The tent and the rude hut of the native sheltered her more often than the hotel. Instead of the record breaking steamer, a floating palace in appointments and size, pursuing a given course in a given time, with little or no reference to wind and wave, she crossed the oceans in sailing vessels, tossed and buffeted by the furious gales of Cape Horn and delayed by the burning calms of the equatorial seas.
America leads the world in the speed, comfort and luxury of her railroad service, and there is now an unbroken connection of comfortable steamer and comfortable car right around the globe, with European or American hotels at every junction. (358)

Here we see that the romance of saddle sores, seasickness, and unforeseen yet inevitable and interminable delays has been replaced by speed, comfort, and ease, all available for the price of a ticket, porter, and hotel room.4

Regretting that “civilization is spreading over every part of the world,” and that “‘hairbreadth ‘scapes’ and dangerous adventures with cannibal and savage” (357) are so much harder to come by, Leland hints at the systems designed to control and commodify women’s travel, which are already firmly in place by the time she embarks. Chaperoned, packaged tours such as those provided by Thomas Cook flourished by the mid-1860s, and increasingly catered to women clients, as critic James Buzard documents in his study, Off the Beaten Track. Focusing on the popularity of tourism among American women during the second half of the nineteenth century, critic Mary Suzanne Schriber describes the extent of the commercialization of women’s travel:

Burgeoning numbers of female travelers, consuming the paraphernalia of travel as well as the thing itself, created healthy markets beyond those of transportation, touring companies, and accommodations. Artifacts such as steamer trunks, clothing, farewell gifts, stationery, travel books, and travel guides were profitable . . . Once women traveled in numbers sufficient to constitute a substantial market, female-specific subindustries flourished. (24–25)

Women tourists traveled to solidify their social position—showing off wealth by consuming chaperoned tours, the latest guidebooks, matching luggage and a travel wardrobe to fill it; obtaining the polish of travel to complete their education as proper young ladies and future wives; and escaping the monotony of their domestic routine to return refreshed and convinced of the superiority of home (in both the local and national senses).5 In fact, tourism worked so well to reinforce the privileges and prerogatives of the comfortable middle class that by the end of the century the figure of the touring woman became a stock character and laughable symbol of middle-class pretension, provincialism, and consumerism. Thus, although it would seem that travel would have
disrupted women’s confinement to hearth and home, tourism instead successfully co-opted women’s travel to reinforce gender roles and the middle-class power structures that gender roles supported. 

Hordes of female tourists did not spring up overnight, but were preceded by travelers like Bradley and Prince who journeyed in search of employment. Insisting on their respectability and femininity despite the fact that they leave the female sphere of home, these women travelers and their texts test the boundaries of gender roles and present their readers with the possibility of mobile, autonomous, and yet appropriately feminine women. Other than the fact that they traveled, Prince and Bradley would seem to have little in common in their narratives—one a schoolteacher in rural Maine, the other a free black woman in Boston; one a private diary, the other a fairly successful book reprinted in three editions. Comparing the two makes sense, however, when we put them in the context of nineteenth-century American women’s travel. An analysis of Prince and Bradley should focus on travel between the extremes of wealthy tourism and forced relocation in order to examine an often-overlooked mode of travel—the elected journeys of single women who travel for work. “Ragged-edge travel” is my designation for these work-motivated trips that capitalized on new, inexpensive mass transit and that risked inconvenience or even danger without the benefits of chaperones, first-class accommodations, or guided tours. In contrast to wealthy women tourists, Bradley and Prince did not have middle-class domesticity as their journeys’ point of departure and ultimate destination. Both women traveled in search of economic and social opportunities, using travel to locate alternative markets for the labor and talent that were devalued at home, having found comfort and security the exclusive province of wealthier Americans. Travel for both women represents risk and possibility, and ultimately a loud protest against their uncertain status on the ragged edges of middle-class prosperity.

Analyzing what I term the “Economies of Travel” for all three women (Leland serves as an illustrative tourist counterpart to Prince and Bradley’s ragged-edge travel)—their own evaluation of the risks and rewards of travel, the subsequent freedom and danger they experience, and finally the strategies of writing and publication they employ—highlights the widely varying material conditions of ragged-edge and tourist travel, as well as the generic innovations ragged-edge travelers make in standard travel-writing formats to tell their stories. Extended
discussions of their economic motivations for traveling, passages in which they become the observed as well as traveling observer, and their use of travel publications to turn a double profit on their transnational traveling labor or to leave a roadmap for future ragged-edge travelers constitute significant departures from traditional travel writing and invite us to reassess the changing meaning of women’s mobility across the nineteenth century.

“How I Came to Go”

Under the heading “How I Came to Go,” Leland presents her decision to travel as one that is made for her, when the unnamed “head of [her] house” offers to buy her a ticket on the steamer Santa Rosa headed to San Francisco via Cape Horn (1). Despite her “horror” of the “fatigue and deprivations of travel—the attention to baggage, tickets, changes, et cetera, required in traveling alone,” Leland stubbornly commits herself to the journey, admitting that she has talked of traveling for years without really intending to go (1). Leland’s denial of responsibility in her own traveling links her more closely with working-class women travelers than with Bradley and Prince. For instance, Lorenza Stevens Berbineau’s diary (recently edited by Karen Kilcup) of her 1851 trip to Europe as a servant to a wealthy Boston family begins aboard the ship with no prior discussion of whether or why to go, emphasizing her lack of power over her mobility. While Berbineau’s trip is certainly not the fulfillment of an expressed (if not truly desired) whim, as is the case with Leland, nonetheless others, in this case her employers, control the opportunity and means of travel.

In contrast, the decision to travel is a much more complicated business for Bradley and Prince, since their position between the wealth of Leland and the servitude of Berbineau presents special economic and social obstacles. In their discussions of the risks and rewards of traveling and the experiences that encourage or force them to leave, the question of whether to travel centers on their experiences of home. Nineteenth-century notions of femininity focus on middle-class white women happily and properly managing homes that are comfortable havens from the public world of men, markets, politics, and travel. Appropriately feminine women occupy appropriate domestic space, and although critics including Amy Kaplan, Linda Kerber, and Gillian
Brown have demonstrated the limits and inadequacy of separate-spheres formulations of women’s experience, instead arguing for more-complex understandings of the ways in which women participated in public life, the doctrine of separate spheres nevertheless operated powerfully on ideological, if not always practical, levels. These formulations of femininity and domesticity were predicated on class privilege in ways that have not been fully interrogated; the texts of Bradley and Prince offer data on how less-privileged women interacted with their society’s definitions of womanhood. Ragged-edge women travelers effectively uncouple domesticity and femininity and lay bare the economic and class underpinnings of hearth and home. Rather than merely recording their longing for access to domesticity, they interrogate domesticity and question the terms on which they can and cannot gain access to “homes in the better sense,” critic Amy Lang’s term for the ideal middle-class domestic setting. In other words, Bradley and Prince very clearly articulate the gap between the performance of appropriate femininity that is supposed to result in a safe and comfortable domestic space and the rigid class boundaries based on wealth and power that exclude many women not merely from the luxuries of the middle-class home, but from its basic economic security as well. Ragged-edge travelers’ open discussions of finances and their use of travel as a means to secure employment in order to eventually purchase domestic comfort challenge what I term “exclusive domesticity” and highlight the ways in which domesticity and travel are, rather than diametrically opposed, interdependent and in constant tension for both women.

In the texts of both Bradley and Prince lengthy discussions of their economic and social struggles in the northeastern United States preface descriptions of their adventures abroad. Despite evidence of their respectability, education, and industriousness, both Bradley (by dint of her genteel poverty) and Prince (by dint of being a free black woman in the racist Northeast) are effectively excluded from the privileges and prerogatives of domesticity. For the unmarried Bradley, domesticity does not offer security, but instead results in frustration with her limited role and persistent financial insolvency. As a black woman, Prince can gain access to domesticity only as a servant, a position of more-severe insecurity that depends on the goodwill of her employers and the performance of backbreaking labor. Their narratives emphasize the crucial distinction between places where you live and the middle-class ideal of home. Bradley’s use of a birdcage image to represent her life before
Amy Morris Bradley traveled from East Vassalboro, Maine, to San Juan, Costa Rica, in 1852 and recorded in her private diary and letter book (her diary contains copies of letters she sent and received) the reasons she decided to travel and the events of what becomes a four-year residence in Costa Rica. The unmarried, educated daughter of a respectable family, Bradley struggled to support herself—eventually trying virtually all of the occupations open to middle-class women: teaching, sewing, and housekeeping for her father and brother. Although Bradley worked, she would not have identified herself as belonging to the working class; if she had been married, her economic picture would likely have been rosier (although her family’s finances suggest the limits of that prospect). Her laments about suitable employment suggest the “problem” that single women posed to society’s ideas about women as exclusively wives and mothers. In the epigraph at the start of this chapter, Bradley cites her “dependence” upon her friends as the primary motive for traveling. Here she recasts the gendered notion of dependence in economic terms; she is not a clinging vine of appropriately feminine frailty, but a would-be worker anxious “to labor enough to earn [her] board,” who is financially rather than emotionally “dependent.” Her emphasis on her economic motivations and her representation of herself as both feminine and poor use the travel genre to redraw the boundaries of femininity and domesticity.

Struggling with her own desire for autonomy and with the gendered expectations of middle-class women’s domesticity and submissiveness, Bradley expresses her frustration through her birdcage image: “The inward stirring, the aimless restlessness of spirit . . . O this spirit longs to be free! But with each effort like a caged bird its means are lessened by the tenement in which it is enclosed.” Bradley reverses common thinking on domesticity with this image—home is not a safe haven, but a miserable cage.

However, she is not only protesting middle-class white women’s limited access to the public world of work, politics, and travel. Bradley underscores the class dimensions of domesticity with her birdcage image. Domesticity is not, for her, a gilded cage of comfort and ease, albeit with necessarily curtailed freedoms. Instead, Bradley’s use of the word “tenement” signals her distance from the ideal of “home in the better sense.” Here she borrows from midcentury formulations
in which, according to Lang, “‘home’ was the antithesis of the over-
crowded, disorderly, inharmonious tenement inhabited by the unruly poor.” Bradley’s version of domesticity is as far from the middle-class ideal as a tenement is from a proper home. For women on the ragged edges of middle-class privilege, the performance of domesticity and femininity does not guarantee comfort or security. Stripped of the gilding of at least a certain level of wealth, femininity and domesticity offer only confinement and dependence without the rewards of stability and security. Travel, which would seem to jeopardize any ties to home and appropriate femininity, thus becomes a viable option for Bradley.12

What circumstances have brought Bradley to this point? As a teacher for nearly a decade, she is not able to secure financial independence, lamenting her situation: “I little thought when I commenced teaching ten years ago at this time, I should be found with a pocket empty as it then was. O No! But those were my days of romance. The later years have been of stern reality changing my ideas of life almost entirely.” Again, we have the marked discrepancy between the domestic ideal and the “stern reality”—this time framed in sentimental terms. The narrative of her life would be not a romance but a gritty story of poverty and disappointment. Her “ideas of life” come from sentimental fiction and the larger culture’s celebration of domesticity. In rejecting the genre, she protests its message. Reality for Bradley is stern indeed, as shown by the sad state of her savings: “I send you the two dollars you so much desire, which is all the money I have, (excepting a gold dollar my cousin gave me a year last Christmas), else I would send you more.”13 She eventually trades sentiment for the travel genre, risking the unsatisfying life she knows for the promise and possibility of travel.

The paltry return on her ten years of teaching encouraged Bradley, who was suffering from failing health, to retreat to the domestic sphere of her family, where she served as housekeeper for her father and brother before she finally decided to travel. Her description of her brief interlude as a housekeeper highlights the inhospitable nature of “home.” Announcing her new occupation, Bradley writes: “I am keeping house for my eldest brother, Asa. I have four in my family—My Father, Brother, apprentice boy, and myself. I do all the work myself except the washing and ironing.” She emphasizes the labor involved in housekeeping because she does not have the servants that wealthier women would have, except for the most arduous tasks, such as laundry. Bradley is initially enthusiastic about her housekeeping efforts, declaring to Jones, “I wish you could see how nice I live—what a fine house-
keeper I make!” In fact, Bradley’s stint as the mistress of her brother’s house ends in a few months. By November Bradley writes, “I am not keeping house. Are you surprised? You would not be, if you knew how my brother treated me!!” Not a picture of domestic bliss, or even of a gilded cage, Bradley’s emphatic rejection of housekeeping hints at patriarchal control and domination. Thus, even in the supposedly female-centered and controlled space of the home, Bradley does not have the autonomy that she craves, and the supposed refuge of hearth and home turns out to be a fraught and conflicted place.14

Bradley responds to her unhappy domestic situation by turning her thoughts to travel. In a letter to a friend who has recently relocated to San Francisco, Bradley writes at length about planning her own California emigration. Her inquiry is clearly preliminary; she is not even familiar with the route or the conveyances she will use on the journey to California. Rather than an actual journey, the trip to California remains in the realm of fantasy, a dreamed-of escape from her domestic duties and her family. Stern financial reality, it appears, intrudes again into Bradley’s fantasy of escape—a third-class ticket to California cost $185 in 1850.15

Bradley frames her fantasy in concrete economic terms, even though she cannot afford to actually go. She speculates that in California social and economic possibilities will be open to women of talent and industry:

I can teach, make dresses, & shirts, etc. Am a pattern of a house-keeper. If ladies were allowed—could make a tolerable clerk or book-keeper—or I might keep a boarding house . . . I can stitch boots—as for shoeing horses, I can not do that—but might possibly learn. What wages could such a prodigy demand, think you?16

Among her marketable abilities Bradley lists both traditionally feminine skills (teaching, dressmaking, housekeeping) and traditionally masculine ones (clerking, bookkeeping, shoeing horses). Most of the skills she lists are ones that she already possesses, but that at home in Maine are currently undervalued or limited only to men.

Portraying herself as a laboring “prodigy,” Bradley draws attention to the labor and skill that are usually masked by domesticity and femininity. Writing to a male friend, William Fuller, who has spent time in California, Bradley is at pains to show the marketable value of her feminine work experience, stressing on her pseudorésumé the
invisible labor of housekeeping and the underpaid, underrecognized feminine field of teaching. The frontier of California, where a scarcity of women translates into a better market for traditional women’s work and more possibilities for entering traditionally masculine fields, revalues the work ragged-edge women do. Travel, then, can translate into “wages,” as Bradley imagines the benefits of locating new markets for her labor. Free black women more often employed geographic mobility in their searches for employment (as we will see with Prince); however, Bradley’s diary invites us to consider whether other ragged-edge (but nonetheless middle-class) white women considered travel a viable alternative or actually undertook travel for the purposes of securing better-paying work. Bradley’s speculation sets the stage for her actual journey to Costa Rica, a trip on which she embarked with only two weeks’ notice because she has already fantasized about the economic and social autonomy travel might offer.

Travel shifts from fantasy to reality when Bradley is offered a job as a governess for a wealthy Costa Rican family, the Medinas. Bradley’s friend and fellow teacher, Stacy Baxter, has been boarding the Medina boys as his students and suggests Bradley for the position. The difficulties of funding travel are overcome by the promise of Mr. Medina, who “will pay all [Bradley’s] expenses there and back again . . . and pay [her] ten dollars a month and perhaps more.” With her teaching experience, Bradley is more than qualified for the position, and the job falls within the narrow range of acceptable occupations for unmarried middle-class women. Governesses usually occupied a social level above household domestic servants, and teaching required a level of education not needed for working-class employees such as servants or factory workers. There was certainly the contradiction that “proper” middle-class women were not supposed to work or travel; Bradley’s position on the margins of the more-secure middle class allows her some leeway in gendered expectations about work. In fact, Bradley’s status as an unmarried, impoverished, but nonetheless middle-class woman suited her well for the job. Mr. Medina “wants to take a lady with him,” and Bradley had the necessary gentility as well as the financial motivation to leave home in search of work. Her skilled labor and class position had a much higher value when transported across national borders to Costa Rica. Thus, Bradley found new markets and endeavors to capitalize on herself as a global commodity.

The opportunity to support herself respectably and see the world convinces Bradley to set sail for Central America from New York on 17
November 1853. Baxter notes that the trip “will require some go ahead on [Bradley’s] part” as it is a “formidable undertaking,” but he credits her with the courage to succeed: “Yours is a brave heart Amy—Listen to its teachings and what it saith do—and do quickly.” Despite Baxter’s assurances (“I have no doubt but Mr. Medina will do well by you”), the prospect of journeying so far with a strange man over dangerous oceans and the Isthmus of Central America does indeed prove to be “formidable.”

But in Bradley’s calculation of the economies of travel, the risks are far outweighed by the rewards travel promises.

By fully representing how her poverty and alienation from domesticity fuel her decision to travel, Bradley exceeds the parameters of the travel genre by focusing as much attention on why she goes as on what happens when she gets to her destination. The result is a cogent critique of the exclusive nature of domesticity and, by extension, the workings of class and gender in American society. Nancy Prince’s similar focus on her motivation for traveling voices even sharper criticism of the racism and sexism that plagued the urban centers of the “free” North.

Prince’s experience as a free black woman in New England is even more alienated from the privilege and comfort of “home in the better sense” than Bradley’s. Because Prince is a prominent member of the black middle class by the time she writes her narrative—she is an uplift worker and abolitionist who moves in the circles of Boston’s well-known black and white abolitionists—her simultaneous poverty underlines the second-class status of free blacks and of Prince herself. Domesticity required the invisible and underpaid labor of women like Prince. Her black skin, then, is read not only as a sign of racial difference (and inferiority) but also as a sign of servility. Her access to domestic space was limited to work as a servant. Travel represents risk and possibility for Prince, as demonstrated by stories she includes in her narrative’s opening pages of her family’s escapes from both slavery and indentured servitude. Although she starts with what is in effect a mini–slave narrative, Prince is at pains, as critic Cheryl Fish argues, to “shift the focus from forced to chosen mobility,” from the trauma of the middle passage to the potential liberation of her own chosen journeys. Including descriptions of her brother’s work as a merchant seaman as well as her own transatlantic journey, Prince further highlights elective and working travel and presents “the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artifacts” such as tracts and books that critic Paul Gilroy identifies as central to the “Black Atlantic,” his term for the transnational cultural exchange that results
from the movement of black people around the globe, but particularly across the Atlantic, during and after the slave trade. As significant as her transatlantic mobility is to an understanding of the Black Atlantic, Prince spends a considerable portion of her narrative documenting how her decision to go resulted from her experience of racism and discrimination at home. Her journeys abroad, first to St. Petersburg, Russia, and then two times to post-Emancipation Jamaica, are made in search of the safe domestic space that she cannot find in the racist northeastern United States.19

Although Prince’s epigraph at the start of this chapter declares that she leaves the United States after seven years of unsuccessful “toil,” she has in fact been struggling from the age of eight to support herself and her family, making the true time of “toil” seventeen years by the time she embarks at age twenty-five. Thirteen pages of Prince’s eighty-nine-page narrative describe her unceasing efforts to hold her family together after her mother is widowed twice, remarries a useless man, and has eight children. Prince represents her only legitimate access to middle-class domesticity—as an overworked servant—early in her narrative, when she describes the grueling and unending labor expected of household servants:

There were seven in the family, one sick with a fever, and another in a consumption; and of course, the work must have been very severe, especially the washings. Sabbath evening I had to prepare for the wash; soap the clothes and put them into the steamer, set the kettle of water to boiling, and then close in the steam, and let the pipe from the boiler into the steam box that held the clothes. At two o’clock, on the morning of Monday, the bell was rung for me to get up; but, that was not all, they said I was too slow, and the washing was not done well; I had to leave the tub to tend the door and wait on the family, and was not spoken kind to, at that. (11)

The physical demands of wash day, coupled with duties as a housemaid and nursemaid, do not even allow time for sleep. Despite Prince’s hard work, she is roundly abused by the family, a sign of her inferior status and her alienation from the comforts and privileges of “home in the better sense” even while she lives there. Her account emphasizes the unrelenting labor involved in maintaining domesticity, and highlights the dependence of domesticity on the low-paid labor of servants like
Prince. Besides working as a servant herself, Prince also finds employment for her numerous brothers and sisters. Fish labels Prince’s caretaking role as an alternative form of the domestic and maternal, which she calls “othermothering,” but farming her brothers and sisters out as servants to experience the kind of abuse and overwork that she does in the scene above instead confirms her exclusion from domesticity.20

Her efforts to realize the “promise of comfort and respectability” continue to be made in vain while she remains in the United States (18). One of several lengthy passages describing her efforts captures Prince’s frustration and desperation:

When winter came, poor mother’s health was declining. Little Samuel could do but little; my father-in-law [actually Prince’s stepfather] was very cross, his disappointment was very great, for he expected to be supported by my brother George and myself. I could not see my mother suffer, therefore I left my place and went to Salem to watch over her and Samuel, and lived in the Rev. Dr. Bolle’s family. In the Spring, I returned to Boston, and took my brother Samuel with me; soon after, my sister Lucy left her place and went to her mother, but was not permitted to stay; my mother wrote to me, requesting me to take care of her. I then determined, in my mind, to bring her to Boston, and if possible, procure a place for her; I then had Samuel and John on my hands; Lucy was not nine, and very small of her age, I could not easily get her a place, but fortunately obtained board for her and Samuel for one dollar a week. My brother John, whom I had boarded, at last got a place where he had wages. Soon the Lord opened the way for little Samuel; Dr. Phelps took him to bring up: so that I was left with one only to sustain; soon my hopes were blasted. John left his place, and was several months on my hands again; finally, he made up his mind to go to sea; I was so thankful that he had concluded to do something, that I took two months’ wages in advance to fit him out for Liverpool, in five months he returned without a single thing but the clothes he had on. (18–19)

Swinging from hope to despair with each sentence, Prince conveys the extremity of her family’s financial insecurity; each family member must work, whether or not they are small children or teenagers. Without a family home, the children must pay to board, be sent into service, or be raised by other families. The risks to the children’s safety
and morality are vividly illustrated in Prince’s earlier account of a sister being “deluded away” into a brothel (12–13). Unlike in Bradley’s diary, travel is not here presented as a longed-for escape. Instead, for Prince the effort to realize the “promise of comfort and respectability” is all consuming. Prince does not have time to fantasize about travel and instead demonstrates her appropriately feminine concern for her family’s lack of “home in the better sense,” which she blames not on racial inferiority but on a marketplace that devalues black labor and limits free blacks to menial service jobs. Her attempts to break this cycle by apprenticing in trade fail, and it is only when this last recourse is exhausted that she abruptly announces her decision “to leave my country” (20). She too will take her undervalued labor to new markets through travel, crossing borders and oceans in search of recognition and payment for her skill and hard work.

Prince does finally experience domestic and financial security in Russia, which I will discuss in the following pages; however, her eventual return to Boston is a return to the same discomfort and insecurity she left nine years before. Her unexpected tumble down a coal chute in the home of a sympathetic white abolitionist underscores the exclusive nature of domesticity for free black women. Offered as an explanation of her subsequent ill health, which inspires and necessitates her turn to writing for a means of financial support, the fall is described by Prince in this fashion:

I was invited to Mrs. Ingraham’s . . . to spend a week. There I met with much encouragement to labor in the cause . . . Saturday evening I went to the bath room, where I left my neck ribbon: returning after it, I had the misfortune to fall through an open trap door, down fifteen feet, on hard coal. I had no light with me. I dislocated my left shoulder, and was generally very much bruised; my screams brought the girl to my assistance. (55–56)

Prince’s fall emphasizes her trespass into middle-class domestic space—a place of comfort and security reserved for whites only. Even in the sympathetic probolition space of Mrs. Ingraham’s “home in the better sense,” surprising dangers exist for Prince. Her narrative demonstrates that black women are excluded from domesticity not because they are not feminine but because they are not white. In fact, she repeatedly insists on her proper femininity, a strategy Frances Smith
Foster notes in her analysis of other passages in Prince’s narrative. In this scene, the neck ribbon reminds her readers of her careful attention to her feminine appearance, a signal of her appropriate femininity. We see this care repeated in other women’s travel writing—emphasizing appropriate femininity through dress to counteract their transgressive mobility. For a black woman such as Prince, however, the performance of femininity is not sufficient to guarantee the protections and comforts of middle-class womanhood, and domestic space remains dangerous and fraught.

She eventually returns to the free black community in Boston with the hope of finding a home in the city and the black community. Instead, class and race work to deny her security even within the marginalized free black community:

The first twenty months after my arrival in the city, notwithstanding my often infirmities, I labored with much success, until I hired with and from those with whom I mostly sympathized, and shared in common the disadvantages and stigma that is heaped upon us, in this our professed Christian land. But my lot was like the man that went down from Jerusalem, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounding him, departed, leaving him half dead. What I did not lose, when cast away, has been taken from my room where I hired. Three times I had been broken up in business, embarrassed and obliged to move, when not able to wait on myself. (84–85)

When she throws her lot in with her fellow blacks, she not only “share[s] in common [their] disadvantages and stigma[ta],” but also experiences betrayal and even theft of her belongings. Economic strife breaks apart the black community as its members turn on each other. There is no hope for domestic space, even if that space is communal. The forces of economics intrude on race solidarity and encourage neighbors to exploit each other.

Given her representations of her continually frustrated attempts to support herself and her family, readers are often astounded by Prince’s travel to such a distant and unexpected location—St. Petersburg, Russia. For the most part, we expect accounts of black life in the nineteenth century to focus on slavery, with travel and mobility associated only with escaping fugitive slaves. Prince’s experiences of racism and pov-
erty illustrate her own time’s difficulty with the concept of free blacks, even in the proabolition hotbed of Massachusetts. Prince’s marriage to Nero Prince makes her unlikely travel to Russia possible. Blacks were introduced into the Russian court by Peter the Great as a source of novelty and exoticism. Nero’s position as a porter in the emperor’s court follows this tradition. Prince’s narrative offers important insight into the experiences of blacks in Russia (an admittedly very small group) in the early 1800s, and scholars of Russian history use her text as one of only a few primary sources on the subject. As will be discussed later in this chapter, Prince was able to capitalize on her Russian travels by offering public lectures.

But before Prince could become an authority on blacks living in the Russian court, she needed to get there, and her marriage provided a relief from her crushing economic hardships and a ticket to St. Petersburg. Interestingly, in her narrative Prince frames the marriage without romantic conventions, as if it is primarily a means to the end of travel:

And after seven years of anxiety and toil, I made up my mind to leave my country. September 1st, 1823, Mr. Prince arrived from Russia. February 15th, 1824, we were married. April 14th, we embarked on board the Romulus, Captain Epes Sargent commander, bound for Russia. (20–21)

The silence surrounding Prince’s marriage (there are only a few other references to her husband, one of which announces his death) may be a self-protective strategy that restricts readers’ access to the most private and intimate details of her life. Alternatively, Fish argues that Prince’s emphasis on her decision to travel rather than on her marriage reveals “the significance of geographical mobility and spiritual empowerment for the black woman’s sense of freedom, agency, and necessary risk.” Practically speaking, Prince’s marriage secures her the means and status she needs to escape the oppressive Northeast. Her exclusion from the comforts and security of domesticity makes the decision to travel a relatively easy one, as was the case with Bradley. The added burden of race makes Prince’s departure perhaps less expected, given her even more limited financial resources, but all the more urgent as she has no family or friends on whom she can be dependent (as Bradley complains of being). The first third of Prince’s narrative does not mention travel, invoking instead the slave-narrative genre (even though she is never
enslaved). Her switch to the travel genre is crucial as it offers her a way to reimagine black womanhood in order to highlight autonomy and self-control and claim femininity at the same time that she pushes the boundaries of gender and race.

What Happens When They Go

The prospect of traveling alone across oceans to unfamiliar territories involves dangers that Bradley and Prince weigh in their decisions, and risks they do not even imagine. If, however, they shared Leland’s privileged position, there would be no reason to hesitate:

It is a question in my mind whether after all the advantages are not in favor of the woman who travels alone. To travel, strictly speaking, alone, is impossible, unless one goes afoot or by canoe. The traveler by train or steamer must perforce move along with a crowd. The woman who travels with husband, father or brother may be supposed to have one man dedicated to her especial protection, but as the woman who is alone appeals naturally to the heart of every brave and honest man, she becomes the charge of the officials and her fellow passengers as well, and her unprotected condition secures the kindest attention and most considerate care of those who are best able to assist and protect her.

In the event of an accident at sea the officers of a vessel take particular care of the lone woman, holding themselves in a measure responsible for her safety. Under ordinary circumstances they will endeavor to entertain her, advise and direct her, and when she passes beyond their own jurisdiction they will bespeak for her the special care of their most trusted friends and strive in every way to secure the future comfort, safety and pleasure of their transient charge.

Of all the pleasant memories of a voyage around the world the most pleasant are of kindnesses received and the most gratifying knowledge acquired is the knowledge of the unselfish kindliness of the heart of man. (358)

Leland’s happy experience of deference and protection was, unfortunately, not shared by ragged-edge travelers. Instead, the “crowd” which buoyed Leland along scrutinized, questioned, and even threat-
ened Bradley and Prince. Fellow passengers stood in for society at large, registering at best surprise and at worst violent disapproval of women’s social and geographical mobility, rather than “kind attention” and “particular care.” Leland’s wealth and the firmly established institution of tourism mediated her experience. Both ragged-edge narratives, in contrast, feature descriptions of the scrutiny their authors endured, the continuing efforts of those authors to work abroad, and the physical danger they experienced both from the process of travel (mule rides along cliffs) and from fellow passengers and residents of the places they visit (Southern slave holders threatening violence and enslavement). Once they depart, the economies of travel that they calculated are out of their control; the risks to both their social standing and their physical bodies were often much greater than they anticipated. Even as their travel writing pays special attention to these new and extreme risks, ultimately their extraordinary stories place the endurance, resourcefulness, and accomplishment of their unlikely heroines center stage.

These conflicts and confrontations with fellow passengers and surprised local residents demonstrate the ways in which bodies functioned as social texts in nineteenth-century America (and today, for that matter). Even as they traveled abroad, women travelers continued to be “read” as out of place and even dangerous themselves. Nineteenth-century American culture came to rely on visual cues of identity and status more and more heavily as urbanization and industrialization disrupted small-town networks of kinship and friendship. Even as mobility became a central element of American life, particularly for nonelite men and women who often left hometowns and established social networks of family and friends in search of economic opportunities in cities or on the frontier, women were expected only to accompany husbands and families, not to travel alone themselves. As we will see with Bradley, leaving behind family and friends could also mean jeopardizing class status, especially for women who relied on factors other than wealth to establish their social status. Reactions to Prince’s skin color reinforced what Fish terms “the unofficial criminal status of free blackness” by automatically equating blackness with slavery. Bodies became texts on which markers of conformity and difference were read. Onlookers may have read a woman’s modest dress neckline, crinoline, and shopping basket as signs of appropriate middle-class femininity; add a suitcase or, more shockingly, black skin, and that body was suddenly troublesome.
Extending our discussion of nineteenth-century bodies as social texts, Jennifer Terry and Jacqueline Urla’s formulation of “embodied deviance” suggests that the social gaze did not just register difference, but assigned value to deviation. Believing that deviance, which can range from being poor or black to being an actual criminal or exhibiting antisocial behavior, registered on a person’s body as a mark that could be perceived, society could then maintain and enforce social hierarchies by limiting or granting access to power and privilege (or, more practically speaking, jobs or social services). For women and African-Americans, their bodies (with markers like breasts and dark skin tone) were always figured in relation to their deviance from white male bodies and found inferior and, therefore, subordinate. Behavior that challenged or undermined women’s and blacks’ inferiority and dependence elicited a social response that punished the individual in question and reinforced the rules for other would-be transgressors. Applied to travel and travel writing, women learned that travel was dangerous to their reputations as well as their bodies through a cultural “rhetoric of peril,” according to critic Kristi Siegel, that taught women to stay at home or at least to travel only on a “safe” chaperoned tour. Women who traveled on their own got what was coming to them, whether that was injury on their trips or social ostracism when they returned home.

The chivalry accorded to white women travelers cushioned their experience of this peril and inconvenience of travel; Leland, for instance, is comfortably sure that “in the event of an accident at sea the officers of a vessel take particular care of the lone woman,” a benefit that is directly tied to her white skin and full pocketbook. Forced to take a very different approach to shipboard safety, another black female traveler, Jamaican Mary Seacole, includes this telling detail in her travel account: “During the time when the contest between fire and water was doubtful [her steamship from Jamaica to Central America catches fire], I entered into an amicable arrangement with the ship’s cook, whereby, in consideration of two pounds—which I was not, however, to pay until the crisis arrived—he agreed to lash me on a large hen-coop.” Seacole must manage her limited financial resources (she is careful not to prematurely squander the considerable sum of two pounds) and her marginal position as a traveling black woman. She must protect herself because she cannot expect the white crew to make her the object of their chivalrous concern. Neither can Seacole expect her white readership to approve of her unorthodox travels. While Leland can, to a large extent,
comfort her readers with her repeated references to the chivalrous care she receives, Seacole must carefully address her audience’s response to the surprising and unwelcome figure of the black female traveler.

Before we return to Bradley and Prince, a brief further look at Seacole and her white contemporary, Mrs. D. B. Bates, will demonstrate how comparing black and white women’s travel texts reveals not only the differences in the material conditions of their travel, but also the different strategies they use to present themselves to their readers. Seacole chronicles her travels through Central America and Panama and to the battlefront of the Crimean War in *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*, published in 1857. Subjected to inspection, Seacole negotiates her racial difference and reactions to it by carefully shifting the reader’s gaze away from her body and onto her clothes. Despite her race and her mobility, Seacole insists on presenting herself as a respectable, feminine woman and supports this performance by dressing the part, no matter the setting in which she places herself. For example, she insists on dressing up while she travels on the Panama route to California, a location referred to as “the pesthole of the world” by American newspapers at the time. On her journey, Seacole encounters a “steep slippery bank” of “Gatun clay” that seriously undermines her “due regard to personal appearance” (12–13). Describing her carefully chosen outfit, “a delicate light blue dress, a white bonnet prettily trimmed, and an equally chaste shawl,” Seacole invites her readers to “sympathize with [her] distress” as she “flounder[s] about terribly, more than once losing [her] footing altogether” (13). Despite the mud and her inconvenient stays and skirts, Seacole conquers the dangerous hill, although her dress does not fare so well: “My pretty dress, from its contact with the Gatun clay, looked as red as if, in the pursuit of science, I had passed it through a strong solution of muriatic acid” (13). Her insistence on dressing up without regard for the danger or dirt of the journey casts her as hyperfeminine, respecting the dictates of the ideology of femininity no matter the cost, and therefore deserving of sympathy from both her readers and her fellow travelers.

While Seacole goes to great lengths both sartorially and textually to mediate the response to her unexpected traveling black female body, the published account of a European-American woman, Mrs. D. B. Bates, shows how class and race privilege can operate to shield the experience of women travelers, much in the way that Leland describes. Bates, originally from Boston and the wife of a steamship captain, published an account of her journey through the same area of Panama, *Incidents on
Land and Water, or Four Years on the Pacific Coast, in 1858, one year after Seacole published her narrative. Bates acknowledges that seasoned travelers “advised all the ladies to dispense with the side-saddle all together, as it would be utterly impossible for them to retain their seats” (291). In addition to a “gentleman’s Spanish saddle,” the women are outfitted with “India-rubber boots, and pants, and a large sombrero, as a protection for [their] heads” (291–92). The dangerous overland route across Panama is no place to stand on ceremony or insist on wearing silk or ribbons; one of Bates’s fellow female travelers almost dies en route (306). Bates’s account emphasizes the practicality of masculine modes of riding and dress; however, her sensible outfit does not protect her from ridiculousness. Like Seacole, she also falls victim to the Panamanian mud, despite her more-practical attire: “After remaining a few moments in the mud, I made an attempt to walk. I would go a few steps and then fall; pick myself up again, take a few more steps, and then tumble the other way” (306). This incident in Bates’s narrative very closely mirrors Seacole’s struggle up the muddy hill, although Bates has no silk dress to worry about ruining. Unlike Seacole, Bates is rescued by a “gentleman” who “came along, picked [her] up, and carried [her] to the desired haven” (306). She is recognized as a white, middle-class woman in need of rescue, despite her choice of pants instead of skirts. As we will see with Bradley, whiteness offered a level of protection even for traveling women breaking the rules of middle-class femininity. For black women like Prince and Seacole, the risks of mobility and autonomy were much more dangerous. Comparing their travel texts illuminates how race impacted the experience, representations, and ideologies of travel.

To return to Bradley, we see that on her sea journey to Costa Rica she arouses suspicion, and her decision to travel becomes a public issue. Quizzed about her identity and motives for traveling, Bradley is clearly conspicuousness as a lone female traveler. After spending four days seasick in her cabin, she describes the scene in which she emerges to find herself the object of general curiosity and interest:

I slowly ascended the stairs which led to the deck hoping that the fresh air would strengthen my poor feeble system, but I had scarcely reached the top stair when my strength failed, and I was obliged to sit down on the floor of the deck and lean my head against the ceiling. Kind hearts were moved by my ghastly countenance, and every assistance was rendered to restore me, I soon recovered sufficiently to walk a little way where they gave me a comfortable seat, and then
came the questions. Where is your husband, or with whom are you traveling? Where are you going? [W]hen I told them I was going to Costa Rica, as governess in the family of the gentleman who was then somewhere on board . . . they shook their heads and seemed to feel much sympathy for me.

Bradley’s weakness after her illness serves as a pretext for this outpouring of social concern, but care and concern expressed for a single woman traveling alone also suggests social disapproval of her traveling.29 By asking, where is your husband? the group seeks to identify her marital status and supply the protection a husband or guardian normally would. The question suggests the inappropriateness of a woman traveling without male supervision. While Leland finds fellow passengers and the ship’s crew ready and willing to supply the place of her male escort and protector, Bradley is traveling before women’s tourism becomes commonplace, and her berth in steerage does not purchase the attentive service of the ship’s staff. Considered inappropriate and at risk, Bradley is obligated to supply the details of her travel arrangements and companions to satisfy her fellow passengers’ curiosity. The questioning reveals the not-so-hidden ideologies that reduce all women to sexual objects (inherently weak and vulnerable and therefore available for male consumption through marriage or violence), which effectively undercut female autonomy. By traveling alone, Bradley makes a spectacle of herself, and her fellow travelers assume the right to interrogate her about her identity and her journey. The fact that her travel is not merely a personal decision, but instead a matter of public interest and potential sanction, signals the cultural anxiety that ragged-edge women’s mobility provoked.

Bradley’s experience of work while traveling forces her to confront still more unexpected social repercussions of her decision to travel. Although the governess position seems to provide Bradley with the perfect solution to her economic problems, she quickly discovers that her employers do not consider her a “lady,” treating her instead as hired help. The swift change in status shocks Bradley, but her position on the margins of the middle class makes her particularly vulnerable, especially once she leaves the support of friends and family back home. Without the social circle in which she has already established herself and without wealth and the respectability it brings, Bradley finds herself in a precarious social position. Biographer Diane Cashman describes the clashing expectations of the Medina family and their new
governess: “[Bradley] expected to be treated as an equal, who would be offered sympathy and protection throughout the harrowing journey. Instead, her employer chose to distance himself socially from his daughter’s governess and retreated to his stateroom to leave Amy to fend for herself in steerage.”30 Bradley’s marginal class position allows her to slip in status from gentility to servant very quickly.

She does not quietly accept her lowered status; on the contrary, she actively resists being treated like hired help. In her journal she notes that the beginning of her journey is also the start of her “tug of war” with the Medina family. Once she arrives in Puntarenas, Costa Rica, Bradley records a series of slights she experiences. Her room is excessively uncomfortable—a cot bedstead with a piece of straw matting for a mattress, on a sheet in which I have slept in ever since my arrival, a green baize blanket for my covering. There is no carpet on the floor that looks as if it has not been washed since the house was built—a small table with no paint, except daubs of ink—a miserable washstand with a badly cracked basin.

Three weeks after her arrival, Bradley still cannot get her clothes washed. The family also refuses to introduce her to their visitors, limiting her contact with anyone but servants.31

Bradley recognizes the family’s attempts to control and demean her: “Do they wish to make a servant of me? It seems so.” Despite the fact that she is completely without friends, family, or money, thousands of miles from home, Bradley declares that “they will not do it!” and makes plans to leave the Medina household. Bradley’s determination to leave the only people she knows in Costa Rica to strike out on her own is extraordinary. However, her sense of herself as a respectable, middle-class woman is at stake. Although she frequently pushes at the boundaries of proper middle-class femininity (by rejecting housework, traveling, and working) and does not have the requisite financial resources, Bradley nevertheless identifies herself as middle-class and relies on the privilege of that social position. On her eventual and planned-for return home, she will not be living in a “classless” society, but in a stratified society that does not facilitate upward social mobility (despite the rhetoric of rags to riches) and that punishes women whose attempts to move up back-fire. Given the difficulty of maintaining her middle-class standing at home (and its attendant privileges of respectability), she is well aware that any further lowering of status would
forever alienate her from middle-class comfort and security. Her story reveals the social risks involved when women travel without the full benefits of white, middle-class wealth and power.\textsuperscript{32} Although the job that originally sparked her decision to travel fails, she continues to focus on her goal of financial independence during her time abroad. By February 1854 Bradley has left the Medinas and records that she is “desirous of obtaining a situation as a teacher or dressmaker.”\textsuperscript{33} She does not seriously consider returning home, because “the same difficulties, trials and vexations would be [hers], if there, as before.” Consequently, rather than facing dependence at home, Bradley strikes out on her own to support herself in a new country. After dressmaking to earn money and studying to improve her Spanish, Bradley establishes “Costa Rica’s first English school” in San Jose. Attracting prestigious students like the children of San Jose’s governor, Bradley and her school are a success. She even fights off a male teaching rival who threatens to steal her students and bankrupt her school. On 13 October 1856 she notes that she has hired an assistant teacher and that the school has expanded to thirty-three students. Bradley returns to the United States in 1857 with “a $500 nest egg from her Costa Rican school,” according to Cashman. After four years abroad, Bradley realizes a significant improvement on her paltry one-dollar gold piece. She successfully locates foreign markets for her labor, but she also trades on her status as an American woman abroad, which allows her to defy the gender expectations of the places she visits. Although her diary includes almost no references to Costa Rican middle-class women, at home in their own culture they probably would not have had the freedom to pursue entrepreneurship the way that Bradley does. Bradley’s position as a foreigner may grant her more latitude in her behavior while still allowing her enough respectability to teach the children of wealthy Costa Ricans. Thus, traveling alone and working, which could threaten Bradley’s status and position in her own home setting, instead secure her independence when she returns.\textsuperscript{34} That independence comes at a price, though: in addition to the social danger she risks almost becoming a servant, she faces physical danger in her journey to Costa Rica. These scenes of physical danger emerge as a common element of ragged-edge women’s travel narratives, performing similar functions and raising similar issues in all the texts presented in \textit{Traveling Economies}. Physical danger focuses attention on the travelers’ female bodies while simultaneously challenging the meaning culturally assigned to their female forms. Highlighting
the out-of-placeness of their female bodies, these passages signal the travelers’ anxiety about their transgression, dramatize the risk to their social standing, and symbolize the vulnerability of their life back home as women excluded from middle-class comfort and security. Chapter 4 will analyze the subversive representations of unfeminine determination, strength, and intelligence, which are also important features of the strategic representation of female bodies in danger.

Bradley’s description of her mule ride over treacherous terrain focuses attention on her out-of-place female body and symbolizes the social as well as physical risks she runs by traveling. By representing both the danger and her survival, Bradley questions the narrow limits placed on women’s lives by society. Her voyage begins by steamer from New York, continues up the San Juan River in Nicaragua, and finally follows the overland route to her final destination, Puntarenas, Costa Rica. For the overland portion of the journey Bradley rides mules over a rocky and difficult trail. Despite the hardship of the journey, Bradley finds humor in the image of herself astride her trusty mule: “Imagine me dressed in my brown linen with a broad brimmed ‘Sombrero’ and blue ribbon, my Bay State shawl spread over the saddle [and] sitting very gracefully thereon.” However, her journal reveals the arduousness of later stages of the mule ride:

Next morning, Sunday, we commenced our overland route to Puntarenas. We traveled from 8 o’clock a.m. till evening, up most difficult rocky mountains, then down their dangerous sides—one misstep of our mules, and we must have been dashed in pieces, in the depths below; but the sure-footed beasts carried us safely o’er, and to the Father I offered my prayer.

Bradley leaves home to escape from domesticity and financial dependence—as we see in this scene she literally risks her life for freedom from those social and economic constraints. She risks her life in another sense as well. After traveling alone she may no longer be considered a marriageable woman, or she may succeed in finding a satisfying alternative to becoming a wife and mother. Either way, her life will no longer follow conventional, middle-class social scripts, and she may be risking forever any access to the goal of comfort, security, and respectability.\

Prince’s experiences of scrutiny and danger are much more severe than the discomfort Bradley endures; as a free black woman her presence does not merely surprise her fellow passengers, but provokes
violent threats and even plots to kidnap and beat her. The intensity of the reaction to Prince results from cultural anxiety about how free blacks fit into American society. Seen as competition for scarce jobs in the Northeast, or as subhuman property in the slaveholding South, in all parts of the nation a mobile free black population threatened white economic and social superiority. Recording the scrutiny and danger in her travel narrative, Prince warns other would-be black female travelers and celebrates her persistence, intelligence, and endurance. Clearly her account is completely different from the sheltered tourism of later women like Leland, since it emphasizes the impact of her race on her experience of travel and also points out her continuing concern with work and finances on her journey. Whether that work is sewing in Russia or missionary activity in Jamaica, Prince travels in search of the economic and social benefits denied African-Americans at home, even as trials and danger on her trip remind her of what she thought she left behind. Not only the material conditions of her traveling but her travel narrative itself is shaped by her experiences of race and class, as Prince cogently critiques racism and sexism, a very different project from Leland’s celebration of her own enjoyment of middle-class privilege.

Once in St. Petersburg, Prince pursues the entrepreneurial ventures that were thwarted in the United States. Her first venture, taking children to board, commences just three weeks after she sets up housekeeping in her new country (39). Prince then realizes that “baby linen making and childrens’ [sic] garments were in great demand” and starts her own business (39). Her enterprise quickly expands and she hires a “journeywoman and apprentices” and even attracts the empress as a customer (39). Critic Sandra Gunning interprets Prince’s two businesses as manifestations of Prince’s “new vision of herself as a respected maternal figure,” a position that “could only come to fruition beyond the circumscribed circle of black American life.” Combined with the story of her entrepreneurial success, Prince’s discussion of herself as a “respected maternal figure” in Russia emphasizes the economic underpinnings of the maternal and domestic back home.

The support of the empress emphasizes the difference between attitudes toward black economic activity in the United States and in Russia. While Prince’s efforts in the States failed consistently, Russia offers favorable conditions for her entrepreneurial efforts. The empress takes an active interest in Prince, who is considered a member of the court despite her skin color: “The present Empress is a very active one,
and inquired of me respecting my business” (39). This initial interest becomes tangible (and for Prince, profitable) support for her enterprise, as the Empress both buys and advertises Prince’s wares: “[The empress] gave me much encouragement by purchasing of me garments for herself and children, handsomely wrought in French and English styles, and many of the nobility also followed her example” (39). Emphasizing the high quality and style of the goods she produces, as well as her famous customer, Prince challenges stereotypes of African-American inferiority by presenting her own success story. Thus, her business achievement in Russia implicates American prejudice in her previous failures back home.

The empress’s patronage emphasizes that Prince was not only economically successful but also socially accepted within czarist society. Skill and ability paired with business relationships with influential and elite community leaders constitute Prince’s revision of middle-class identity, a revision based on the theory of a democratic meritocracy rather than the reality of America’s highly stratified and segregated society. Hence, according to Gunning, even as she describes czarist court life, Prince presents “Russia as a site of displaced engagement with the social conditions of her native land.” However, Gunning’s comparison of Prince’s text to James Buzard’s formulation of wealthy white Americans’ “temporary, revivifying departure from compromised social existence” while touring Europe fails to fully appreciate Prince’s revision of the travel genre. Prince crafts a wide-ranging critique of American society that questions her exclusion from the benefits and privileges of both full citizenship and middle-class status, and, by extension, the exclusion of the free black community from those benefits and privileges. Her unexpected participation in both travel and travel writing challenges notions (then and now) about who traveled in nineteenth-century America; her text raises related questions about how travel writing by marginalized authors can effectively protest sources of social injustice back home. Even as Prince compellingly portrays the economic and social conditions that make travel an attractive or even desperate option, her travel is not an escape, temporary or otherwise. She remains engaged with the both the ideals and the realities of the United States, traveling and writing to call attention to the gap between the theory and practice of the emerging nation.38

Prince’s representation of czarist court life contrasts the court’s racial tolerance with her earlier account of racism and economic discrimina-
tion in the United States. Her lengthy description of her court reception highlights her position in a society that, while stratified, is not organized along race lines:

As we passed through the beautiful hall, a door was opened by two colored men in official dress. The Emperor Alexander, stood on his throne, in his royal apparel . . . as I entered, the Emperor stepped forward with great politeness and condescension, and welcomed me, and asked several questions; he then accompanied us to the Empress Elizabeth; she stood in her dignity, and received me in the same manner the Emperor had. They presented me with a watch, &c. It was customary in those days, when any one married, belonging to the court, to present them with gifts, according to their standard; there was no prejudice against color; there were there all casts [sic], and the people of all nations, each in their place. (23)

Prince notes the presence of the black porters, pointing to the participation of blacks in court, their “official dress” signaling their status. Prince’s husband holds a position as a porter, and Prince is honored because of her marriage to a member of the court. Her reception by Russian heads of state is a dramatic shift from the narrative’s earlier descriptions of her life of struggle in America. As a poor black woman, Prince was assigned a position of powerlessness within larger American society. The visible markers of her gender and race translated into a corresponding marginal social position that limited her access to economic opportunity. In Russia, however, Prince assumes social standing and public acknowledgment of her new status. Her ringing endorsement of her new home as free from “prejudice against color” may be overly optimistic, but her presentation is strategic. Russia becomes a utopia in the context of Prince’s narrative—a racially tolerant alternative to the injustice of her home country. However, the racial tolerance that Prince experiences does not negate the severe oppression enacted simultaneously through the Russian system of serfdom. The omission of an extended discussion of serfdom from her account reveals her narrative’s primary concern with social injustice at home in the United States, as opposed to the exploitation she witnesses abroad. As historian Peter Kolchin argues, parallels existed between the treatment of Russian serfs and American slaves: “Serfs could be bought and sold, traded, won and lost at cards. They were, in short, personal
property . . . The control also extended to the bodies of the serfs, who could be corporally punished as an owner saw fit, removed from their loved ones at his whim, and denied his permission to marry.  

Prince does briefly make her own comparison between slavery and serfdom: “The village houses are built of logs corked with oakum, where the peasants reside. This class of people till the land, most of them are slaves and are very degraded. The rich own the poor, but they are not suffered to separate families or sell them off the soil. All are subject to the Emperor” (38). In her mention of serfs, Prince highlights the distinction between their situation and what she perceives as the worst aspect of American slavery, namely, the separation of family members. Her criticism of slavery also has class dimensions, since the breakup of families in slavery signals blacks’ exclusion from the privileges and prerogatives of white, middle-class domesticity. Social and kin networks that can establish class standing and respectability even without wealth are also disrupted when families are torn apart. Arguing that all Russians of all social positions are ultimately “subject to the Emperor,” Prince implicates the use and abuse of privilege by members of the American middle class and the lack of recourse for African-Americans (as opposed to Russians, who all have at least limited access to protection and citizenship). Rather than criticizing Russia as another society built on forced labor, Prince focuses on the economic opportunities open to her as a black woman in Russian society. Her description of the serfs is immediately followed by her account of her successful business venture as a seamstress.

Prince uses her description of social institutions and conventions in a foreign country, the accepted content of travel writing, to criticize the operation of society in her home nation. Comparing Russian serfdom and American slavery, she identifies race prejudice, the inevitable outcome of chattel slavery, as the paramount social injustice. Comparing Russian serfdom to American slavery is less compelling for Prince than comparing the experience of living as a black woman in the two countries. Her success in Russia belies the stereotypes about black inferiority that fueled the prejudice she encountered in the hypocritical North. What is different between the two places is not Prince herself—she carries her skill and intelligence with her on her travels—but social attitudes toward the possibilities open to black women.

Prince returns from Russia due to ill health in 1833, “having been absent about nine years and six months” (40). Her husband, who
remained in Russia to earn money before returning to the United States, dies unexpectedly and leaves Prince a widow. She resides in Boston until her next journey, this time to post-Emancipation Jamaica, and works in “different occupations,” participating in William Lloyd Garrison’s Anti-Slavery Society (42). Her narrative omits a detailed account of this period of her life; her subsequent decision to travel again suggests that the same difficulties with employment probably recurred and that travel once again provided a potential solution. Her second and third journeys take her to Jamaica, where she evaluates the possibilities for black emigration to the island and investigates prospects for pursuing uplift work herself among the emancipated Jamaican blacks and American fugitives who have already relocated.  

The third chapter’s discussion of Mary Ann Shadd Cary will explore how free black women use travel to claim authority and gain voice in national and international debates on citizenship, black nationalism, and racial uplift. However, the remainder of the discussion of Prince will focus on her return journey, when she experiences threats of violence, imprisonment, and enslavement that throw into relief the extreme risk she runs as a black female traveler. Recording the threats in her travel narrative, Prince warns other would-be black female travelers and exposes the race politics of “home” (in this case, in the worst sense).

While elite white women’s bodies were hidden behind the rhetoric of domesticity, “the black woman’s body was always envisioned as public and exposed,” according to critic Carla Peterson. Black slave women’s bodies were visually and even physically available on the auction block, and assumptions about blacks being subhuman and black women being unfeminine combined with that visual access to deny black women power in both public and private settings. Traveling contested these formulations of black womanhood, ascribing autonomy and mobility to black women who were supposed to be dehumanized producers of physical and reproductive labor.  

Prince’s travel narrative vividly depicts the violence that polices black mobility. A storm disables Prince’s ship and it must stop for a week in New Orleans to effect repairs. During the layover, Prince is forced to stay on board the ship, unable to disembark because whites on shore threaten to capture, imprison, and enslave her (76). Prince immediately attracts attention; she terms herself “a spectacle for obser-
vation” by the white slave owners on the dock (76). Like Bradley, she is subject to interrogation, but the questions pertain to her slave or free status, as opposed to her marital status. Prince describes the inquisition that immediately follows the ship’s arrival: “The people were very busy about me; one man asked me who I belonged to, and many other rude questions; he asked me where I was born” (76). This series of “rude questions” begins, of course, with the supposition that Prince is a slave. Her skin color is instantly registered and interpreted as a sign of slave status, the white gaze inscribing Prince within existing social frameworks, in this case those of chattel slavery. While Bradley’s fellow passengers judge her actions against standards of acceptable middle-class feminine behavior, the whites in New Orleans perceive Prince’s traveling as a violation of race expectations.

As travelers and travel writers, both Prince and Bradley intend to observe foreign locations and people and to record those observations. What each of their narratives demonstrates is that their unexpected presence as female travelers makes them into tourist attractions. The result is that both women become objects for public consumption, a situation that undermines the self-determination they seek through travel. Peterson asserts that black women travelers consistently experienced this objectification and became what she terms “Colored Tourists,” observers who found themselves scrutinized by the very people they were intent on studying. According to Peterson, Prince’s account “illustrate[s] the stance of the black female social explorer who authorizes herself to gaze at the Other but must in turn, and despite all attempts at self-protection, become a commodity and subject herself to this Other’s gaze.” The gaze that instantly records Prince’s skin color and registers her out-of-placeness as a traveler reinforces the objectification of slavery that ultimately extends to free blacks and excludes them from the middle-class prerogatives of self-possession and privacy. Our previous discussion of Bradley expands Peterson’s formulation to include ragged-edge white female travelers. To extend Peterson’s argument to Bradley is not to rob it of its crucial specificity, but instead draws attention to the heightened visibility of both white and black women travelers—this, combined with the circulation of their texts, suggests the powerful place they occupied in antebellum America’s cultural consciousness, embodying the culture’s anxiety over both women’s and blacks’ self-determination.
Even as they record moments of being scrutinized in their texts, ragged-edge travelers also lay claim to the observer’s gaze typically found in conventional travel writing, a move that insists on their autonomy and agency despite the unfavorable response to their unwelcome traveling presence. Immediately before she narrates her experience in New Orleans, for instance, Prince includes a description of slaves she observes from the ship, emphasizing the difference between herself and them: “I was made to forget my own condition, as I looked with pity on the poor slaves, who were laboring and toiling, on either side, as far as could be seen with a glass” (76). Looking through binoculars at slaves working in the fields, Prince signals both her physical distance from the people she observes and her social distance from the status of slave. Her observations lay bare the limited vision of the whites, who mistake her identity and who cannot conceive of a woman both black and free. Although Prince expresses sympathy for the slaves, she primarily uses their bodies to establish her own identity, to contrast their slavery with her freedom, their stasis with her mobility, their objectification with her agency. Hence, Prince’s black female traveling body is no longer a blank canvas onto which cultural meaning is written; the project of her travel writing becomes rewriting her own black female body and the meaning it carries.

Discrimination, enslavement, and violence—these are the escalating threats that Prince negotiates as a black female traveler. The degree of race hatred that she portrays in her narrative—the danger she faces whether at home or traveling—illuminates the failure of the United States to provide basic protections, much less the constitutional guarantees of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, to those outside the racial and economic boundaries of the middle class. What is at stake is not just Prince’s right to travel or to write, but to live outside slavery and to live at all. The final scene I will discuss in this section illustrates the severity of the physical and social risk run by black female travelers.

Once Prince is finally homeward bound to New England from her second trip to Jamaica, she includes a conversation with the ship’s captain, which reveals the extent of the danger she faces on her journey. The captain congratulates Prince on her wisdom in remaining on the ship while it was docked in the Southern ports and tells her about a plot engineered by Prince’s white fellow passengers:

The Captain asked me why I did not go ashore when there in the
Comet; “had you,” said he, “they intended to beat you. John and Lucy Davenport, of Salem, laid down the first ten dollars towards a hundred for that person who should get you there.” (81)

The captain’s casual tone belies the violence of the plot against Prince. If she had been lured or taken from the relative safety of the ship, Prince would have been at the mercy of “respectable” white people like the Davenports. Prince’s presence as a free black woman traveler and outspoken abolitionist so offends her white fellow passengers that they raise money to pay her would-be attackers. Apparently headed for Salem, Massachusetts, the Davenports are Northerners, showing that this kind of violent threat is not solely the province of Southern slaveholders.

The resistance in this scene is found in Prince’s survival. Cheryl Fish has drawn attention to Prince’s defiant “back talk” during her response to the inquisition on the dock, when she asserts her humanity and condemns both slavery and slaveholders. In the conversation with the captain, Prince does not record her own reaction to his comments. So while she refuses to be silenced on the docks in New Orleans and Key West, she chooses to be silent in her text following the revelation of the violent plot against her. Perhaps the reason for this choice is that the extent of the violence and racism arrayed against her in effect speaks more strongly than even her own words could. Her escape from the threatened beating, as well as from imprisonment or enslavement, testifies to her strength of will, her quick-thinking intelligence, and her spirit, as well as to some measure of luck. While existence on the margins of society secures a measure of freedom for some black women travelers, this scene reveals the vulnerability and pain that also mark that existence. As Peterson notes, “Indeed, margins are often uncomfortable places; as the lives of African-American women, past and present, exemplify, they can be sources of horrifying pain, generators of unspeakable terrors, particularly in their exploitation of the black female body.” Prince’s very survival in a world so hostile to her existence defies the systems and ideologies that perpetuate that hostility. Travel is an important strategy for resistance, but the scrutiny and danger that Prince experiences attempt to curtail her troubling mobility and autonomy. Her limited success battling danger and discrimination is, of course, worlds away from the experience of later tourists like Leland. However, that success does suggest the need for better and
more-effective controls on women’s, and particularly black women’s, travel that the institution of tourism eventually fills when chaperoned tours conveniently exclude black women through high prices and racial segregation.

Circulating Bodies, Circulating Texts: Who Was Reading Women’s Travel?

Contemporary reviews of Leland’s travel narrative rank her accomplishment alongside that of the most famous traveling women of the late nineteenth century. *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine* (one publication) proclaims, “Leland was a forerunner of Nelly Bly and Elizabeth Bisland in circling the world in the character of the unprotected female,” while the *New York Daily Tribune* titled its review of her book “A Yankee Ida Pfeiffer, Going Round the World.” Even as both publications place Leland on a growing list of women world travelers, the comparison to her more-famous contemporaries reinforces the women’s exceptionality rather than acknowledging and sanctioning women’s mobility. Leland’s success is not the rule, but “the secret of Miss Leland’s success as a traveller is, however, an open one. She is plainly a young woman of exceptional self-control and steady good temper” (*NYDT*). Even her sterling character, however, offers scant protection from the dangers surrounding the female traveler. Although the *Tribune* acknowledges that “she was but once in all her extensive journeyings even threatened with insult,” both reviews evoke the threat of “insult and harm” (*OMOWM*) to discourage their female readers from following Leland around the globe. Leland circumvents the danger “by her resolute refusal to seem to see anything that is unpleasant,” (*OMOWM*) but her good humor and her cultivation of “the traditional ‘stony British stare’” (*NYDT*) seem ridiculously little protection against the threats conjured in the pages of the reviews, never mind actually on the road. The review’s description of the risk she runs “trusting herself alone with the Arab guides and beggars who swarm” the pyramids uses racist rhetoric to frighten women into staying home, but there are still more dangers to consider (*NYDT*).

*Overland Monthly* decres Leland’s “tastes” as “hopelessly and aggressively philistine,” a critique echoed by the *Tribune*: “The young traveller’s comments upon men and cities and works of art [in other
words, her entire narrative] are decidedly entertaining, and not seldom because of the nave [sic] crudity [sic] and lack of culture which characterizes them.” Luckily for Leland she is blissfully unaware of “her own dense incapacity as a critic” (NYDT). The danger here is, of course, publicly revealing stupidity and naïveté, a problem that threatens women in particular, as travel and travel writing are apt, according to these reviews, to reveal the intellectual weaknesses of the so-called weaker sex. It is not just that “a little touch of the common in her way of looking at things” (OMOWM) is the problem; it is that the public revelation of her bad taste and uneducated opinions again argue that women are better off at home than out in the world publishing travel books. And ultimately that is the point both reviews are at pains to make:

The fact that a young and pretty woman can in these days go all around the world with perfect impunity may easily be made to carry too much significance. Miss Leland’s triumphant success was, we have no doubt, very largely due to her own reserve and circumspection . . . but it would probably not be wise for even American women [Leland herself is American] to “go and do likewise” on a considerable scale, seeing that temperament is an important factor in the case. (NYDT)

Even as both reviews celebrate the magnitude of Leland’s accomplishment, they also reduce her text to an occasion to admonish women not to follow in her traveling footsteps.

Both reviews of Leland’s text take her narrative seriously, however, even if they do discourage other would-be women world travelers. But Schriber raises the possibility that Leland’s text may be a “pseudo-account, a parody of other travel accounts by lone female travelers”; she cites the text’s hyperbole, its “‘Twainesque’ diction,” and its excessive repetition of “alone” and “woman alone.” Even though she raises her concerns about the authenticity of the text, Schriber ultimately concludes that fake or not, Leland’s travel narrative confirms “the lone woman traveler’s visibility and the prominence enjoyed by her accounts of travel.” While I cannot offer definitive proof that Leland’s text was not a parody, these contemporary reviews suggest that her text was not received as such by readers. I agree with Schriber that a parody would only reinforce the figure of the woman traveler in the popular imagination and that familiarity with the subject, in this case the woman traveler, is necessary for successful parody.48 What Traveling
Alone tells us, in either case, is that women travelers and the published version of their adventures continued to be a hot commodity until the end of the nineteenth century. Leland’s publication, trading as it did on the popularity of women’s travel narratives, invites us to look back on the circumstances under which the accounts of Bradley and Prince were published.

Who read Prince’s published travel text? Did friends or relatives read Bradley’s diary? How did contemporary readers react to their texts? Did written accounts of their unconventional travels generate the same level of disapproval in readers as they record it generating in their fellow passengers? Questions about the reception of both women’s texts lead us to ask whether the figure of the female traveler was an anomaly in the early nineteenth century—or whether the intense reaction Prince and Bradley experienced signaled growing cultural anxiety about increasingly mobile women.

Bradley describes herself as an anomaly, but she nevertheless solicits acceptance and tolerance of her behavior from her audience. Bradley’s self-portrait, recorded in a letter to her young female cousins, Betsy and Elizabeth Bradley, highlights her deviance from traditional femininity:

I am an old maid of 34 years. My eyes are large and gray—forehead high, but freckled, large nose and mouth—but my cousins don’t be frightened, I have got a great warm heart to go with these ugly features, so ’tis barely possible, you might love me a little, if I am plain looking.

You need not be surprised when the warm weather comes, to see me at your place. It would be just like me some morning to take a carpetbag, jump into the cars and go. There is no aristocracy about me. I am a true Republican—detest all the false customs of society, etc., etc.

Conventional in neither her appearance nor her actions, Bradley links her unexpected behavior and her desire to travel. An “old maid,” she has not followed the traditional path to marriage and domesticity taken by many of her white, middle-class female contemporaries. Travel functions as an escape from these unrealizable domestic expectations, and travel writing serves as an outlet for her critique of the society that produces limiting ideologies of proper femininity and limited options for women who seek to support themselves.49

Bradley’s journal also indicates a wider audience for her social criti-
cism. Containing copies of letters addressed to her niece and young female cousins, her journal is semipublic. Intending to influence, to advise, and “to give to my dear niece the plain, unvarnished history of the aunt whom she thinks—according to her last kind letter, she somewhat resembles,” Bradley intends for her writing to occupy the place of legacy for her female relatives. Her story offers her niece and cousins a map of obstacles to female accomplishment and the example of her own defiant success.

While Bradley’s life and travel diary represent resistance on a personal or small-scale level, Prince with her published account of her Life and Travels self-consciously enters into the public debates raging over issues of abolition and emigration. A review of the pamphlet The West Indies, Being a Description of the Islands, Progress of Christianity, Education, and Liberty Among the Colored Population Generally, By Mrs. Nancy Prince (1841), which Prince developed and expanded in her later published narrative, appears in the Colored American and acknowledges Prince as an “eye-witness” and authority on the question of black emigration to Jamaica. Praising Prince as “an intelligent colored female,” the Colored American congratulates her on proving the correctness of the paper’s stance against emigration. As we will see in the third chapter’s discussion of Mary Ann Shadd Cary, traveling and travel writing could authorize black women’s entry into political speech and activism within the black community. While Prince’s Narrative continued to voice her political opinions on slavery, racism, and emigration, it also was intended to support her financially. She had already generated income from her travels; she had given public lectures on her time in Russia and had sold her Jamaican emigration pamphlet, advertising both in the abolitionist newspaper Liberator. Prince’s Narrative was reprinted in three editions, so her text did reach an audience (most likely of the black community and white abolitionists), but it most likely did not alleviate the desperate financial needs that had inspired her writing:

My object is not a vain desire to appear before the public; but, by the sale, I hope to obtain the means to supply my necessities. There are many benevolent societies for the support of Widows, but I am desirous not to avail myself of them, so long as I can support myself by my own endeavors. Infirmities are coming upon me, which induce me to solicit the patronage of my friends and the public on the sale of this work. Not wishing to throw myself on them, I take this method to help myself, as health and strength are gone. (3)
Highlighting “Travels” in the title of her narrative, Prince strategically inserts her text into the growing market for travel writing, which will be discussed in more depth in the following chapter on Anne Royall. Like her lectures, Prince’s *Narrative* trades on the cultural fascination with travel and mobility that had apparently, at least momentarily, overcome the suspicion of traveling women and blacks that existed simultaneously in the popular imagination. It may well be that Prince’s black and white abolitionist audiences were more tolerant of black autonomy and personhood, and as consumers of slave narratives were more accepting of black mobility, at least in the form of stories of fugitive slaves running to the North. Prince’s own experiences of racism in Boston suggest the limits of this possibility, but her text certainly did circulate, at least in the abolitionist center of Boston, and along with this circulation the figure of the black woman traveler entered the cultural imagination.

While Bradley’s letters to her nieces and Prince’s racial uplift work and published travel narrative extend their voices into their communities and their goals beyond their own personal success, the travel writing of Anne Royall and Mary Ann Shadd Cary focuses on wider public issues of community improvement and, ultimately, nation-building. Concerned with legislative reform, the management of public institutions and finances, and national debates on emigration and abolition, the travel writing of these two women journalists is unorthodox in its content and form. Their journalistic travel writing circulated in the potentially wider circles of subscription book sales for Royall and newspaper-column inches for Shadd Cary, suggesting that representations of female travelers, like their travel texts, were gaining a larger audience and were therefore impacting cultural ideas about women, travel, national identity, and citizenship.