4. "Singular Spectacle of a Female:" Frances Wright's Traveling Figure

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A “Singular Spectacle of a Female”

Frances Wright’s Traveling Figure

As to Fanny Wright, you said you believed her to be honest in her opinions, amiable in her disposition, philanthropic in her efforts, and endowed with rare intellect. Allowing that you are as near right as partisans usually are, in estimating leaders, still I must compliment you by saying, that I believe you have secret feelings that would present a very different picture of this strange excrescence of female character.

Every man of sense and refinement, admires a woman as a woman; and when she steps out of this character, a thousand things that in their appropriate sphere would be admired, become disgusting and offensive.

The appropriate [sic] character of a woman demands delicacy of appearance and manners, refinement of sentiment, gentleness of speech, modesty in feeling and action, a shrinking from notoriety and public gaze, a love of dependence, and protection, aversion to all that is coarse and rude, and instinctive abhorrence of all that tends to indecency and impurity, either in principles or actions. These are what are admired and sought for in a woman, and your sex demand and appreciate these qualities as much as my own. With this standard of feeling and of taste, who can look without disgust and abhorrence on such a one as Fanny Wright, with her great masculine person, her loud voice, her untasteful attire, going about unprotected, and feeling no need of protection, mingling with men in stormy debate, and standing up with barefaced impudence, to lecture to a public assembly. And what are the topics of her discourse, that in some cases may be a palliation for such indecorum? Nothing better than broad attacks on all those principles that protect the purity, the dignity, and the safety of her sex. There she stands, with brazen front and brawny arms, attacking the safeguards of all that is venerable and sacred in religion, all that is safe and wise in law, all that is pure and lovely in domestic virtue. Her talents only make her the more conspicuous and offensive, her amiable disposition and sincerity, make her folly and want of common sense the more pitiable, her freedom from private vices, if she is free, only indicates, that without delicacy, and without principles, she has so thrown off all feminine attractions, that freedom from temptation is her only, and shameful palladium. I cannot conceive any thing in the shape of a woman, more intolerably offensive and disgusting.

—Catherine Esther Beecher, Letters on the Difficulties of Religion (1836)
ust who was Frances “Fanny” Wright, and what did she do to be described as a wart (“strange excrescence”), an amazon, and a monster in the space of a single page? Wright’s complicated life includes travel writing; owning and editing her own newspaper; gaining a national reputation for her lectures and writings on freethinking, Woman’s Rights, labor reform, abolition, and, most shockingly, free love; not to mention rumors of affairs with famous men, an illicit pregnancy, and a subsequent, disastrously unhappy marriage. While Anne Royall grabbed headlines for several months with her common-scold trial, Wright spent two decades as a lightning rod for cultural anxiety about women’s roles and women’s place. Catherine Beecher was not Wright’s only critic; rather, she joined a chorus of clergy and mainstream media who found in Wright a convenient target for their strict policing of gender roles. By the late 1820s, biographer Celia Morris Eckhardt argues, Wright was “the symbol of most things women should not be,” and her name became an epithet used to “discredit liberal causes” ranging from abolition to labor reform.

Other women lectured publicly to “promiscuous” audiences (comprising both men and women) during the same period, for example, the abolitionist Grimke sisters and the African-American spokeswoman Maria Stewart. The extreme reaction to Wright centered on the radical content of her speeches and writing and the radical fact of her travel and mobility. An analysis of Wright’s travel writing, her later Woman’s Rights theorizing and activism, and the contemporary media’s reaction to her traveling female presence illuminates how travel informed and shaped her feminism and how she responded to and attempted to revise the cultural response to her traveling female body. While her detractors were more comfortable seeing Wright as an isolated and extreme example, her experience and writing, on the contrary, connect with the work of other writers featured in *Traveling Economies*—specifically Anne Royall and Mary Seacole—to show how women travel authors represent their own mobile bodies in the pages of their texts. Although Wright was economically and socially more privileged than these other travelers, her outspoken political commentary and activism compromised her social position and therefore placed her on the ragged edge of middle-class respectability.

Wright’s public career began eighteen years before Beecher castigated her in the pages of *Letters on the Difficulties of Religion* (1836),
with her decision to travel. Leaving Scotland accompanied only by her younger sister, Camilla, Wright toured the northeastern United States for two years and published her praise of the new nation in an epistolary travel narrative, *Views of Society and Manners in America.* She shared the political focus of Royall’s slightly later travel writing, as evidenced by Wright’s chapter descriptions: “Remarks on the conduct of the first American Congress,” “Internal government of the states,” “National Government,” “Federal Constitution,” and “Effect of political writings.” She devotes more than two-thirds of her narrative to a celebration of the country’s democratic social and political principles; the last third of the book shifts to consider the place of women in the new republic. With improvements in education, Wright argues, American women (white, middle-class women, at least) stand poised to reap all the benefits democracy has to offer, a promise Wright hopes to claim for herself in the not-too-distant future. Thus, at the end of her travelogue, women’s bodies claim center stage as Wright recasts white, middle-class women as citizens and works to populate the body politic with female thinkers, leaders, and voters. This is just the beginning of Wright’s radical feminism, but even here her travel and travel writing constitute a crucial first step in her thinking. The public will continue to link her radical ideas with her physical mobility, and the negative reaction to her reveals the virulence of cultural hostility to traveling women.

Asking “Who can look without disgust and abhorrence on such a one as Fanny Wright?,” Beecher reconfirms the conspicuousness of the female traveler and the viciousness of the rhetoric policing proper femininity. Beecher’s rant is pure hyperbole, its very excess betraying the anxiety that the image of an independent, outspoken, unconventional traveling woman generated in the 1820s and 1830s. Wright is Beecher’s Frankenstein, an ill-advised experiment with women’s autonomy that has gone monstrously wrong. Her body marked with unfeminine strength, independence, and opinions (not to mention bad fashion sense), Wright in Beecher’s estimation shares “the shape of a woman,” but none of the morality, decorum, domesticity, or subservience that is the substance of femininity. Alternatively, Wright represents her own traveling female body, in the process revising the limited notions of what women can do and where they should go, a project and practice shared by Royall and Seacole. All three women present their strong, capable female bodies for the purpose of challenging prevailing
assumptions about women’s unfitness for travel or public life.

Claiming expertise on “all that is pure and lovely in domestic virtue,” Beecher argues that properly feminine, white, middle-class women belong in the home. Ironically, Beecher herself was fast becoming a public figure: “At the height of her career in the mid-nineteenth century, Catharine Esther Beecher was one of the most famous women in America,” according to historians Jeanne Boydston, Mary Kelley, and Anne Margolis. An advocate for women’s education, Beecher founded three schools for women and actively published her opinions on women, education, religion, and home management. Her *Treatise on Domestic Economy, for the Use of Young Ladies at Home, and at School* (1841) was so popular it was published fifteen times in fifteen years, and was later expanded into *The American Woman’s Home: or, Principles of Domestic Science; Being a Guide to the Formation and Maintenance of Economical, Healthful, and Christian Homes* (1869). The Martha Stewart of her day, Beecher built her career on telling other women how to manage their homes, while she managed her public career. Her attack on Wright conveniently deflects attention from her own public life and work through the skillful depiction of Wright’s inappropriate, unfeminine public work and travel. Using Wright as the counterexample to “what [is] admired and sought for in a woman,” Beecher defines appropriate middle-class femininity by explaining what it is not. Problematically, Wright, Royall, and Seacole use similar strategies in their travel writing, drawing attention to the bodies of “other” racially different or poor women to assert their own femininity by means of the contrast. An analysis of this strategy as it works across their diverse texts further illustrates the complex ways that women travelers negotiate their audiences’ response to their traveling bodies.

The violence of that cultural response to women travelers often took the women themselves by surprise. A cartoon featuring Wright with a woman’s body and the quacking, nagging head of a goose reinforces Wright’s monstrosity; she is an experiment in new roles for women gone wrong. Editorials proclaiming her “the Red Harlot of Infidelity” and “a bold blasphemer, and a voluptuous priestess of licentiousness” share Beecher’s strategy of linking Wright’s sexualized body with her transgressive behavior and ideas. The *New York Evening Post* refers to Wright as a “singular spectacle of a female, publicly and ostentatiously proclaiming doctrines of atheistical fanaticism, and even the most abandoned lewdness.” Infidelity in the early-nineteenth-century
sense referred primarily to heresy (Wright openly questioned religious hypocrisy and argued that religion should be replaced by rational free-thinking), but as historian Lori Ginzberg points out, “Labels linking irreligion with sexual and domestic instability seemed to ‘work’” during the period. In other words, linking harlotry with heresy made sense; expressed sexuality and a lack of pious devotion were both crimes against the emerging standards of middle-class femininity that women like Beecher were enshrining and empowering. While Ginzberg argues that the most important use of Wright’s public image was to convince women of “the utter evil—the absolute unthinkableness—of irreligion,” I argue that embedded in Beecher’s rant and the media diatribes is an equal measure of anxiety about mobility and travel for women. Cumulatively, the media attacks reduce Wright’s problematic body and her ideas to an insult to be hurled at other women who overstep their bounds. Ginzberg observes the peculiar potency of the “epithet” of “Fanny Wright” or “Wrightism” that was applied at least until 1848 to people and causes as varied as Woman’s Rights advocate Antoinette Brown and the New York Working Men’s Party, and concludes that “Frances Wright, both the woman and her philosophy, exemplified the fears and anxieties of her age.” The media treatment of the unconventional, outspoken female traveler was designed to deter other women from following in her traveling footsteps.

Although Wright’s traveling body was ultimately co-opted by a cultural vision of women devoted exclusively to domesticity, an examination of her travel writing offers insight into the development of her own vision of women’s autonomy and citizenship. Comparing her strategies for negotiating audience response to her own traveling independent female body with the strategies of Royall and Seacole shows how ragged-edge travel authors challenged definitions of femininity by including their own performances of unfemininity. Finally, a discussion of women travelers’ troubling reliance on denigrating “other” women’s bodies demonstrates the limits of their traveling revisions of gender roles. The notoriety of all three ragged-edge travelers ensured that new ideas about white women and black women traveled almost as widely as the women themselves. However, their traveling accomplishments were overshadowed by their experiences of public censure and ultimately taught other women more about the risks than the rewards of public travel and public life.
Beecher’s list of femininity’s greatest hits—“delicacy of appearance and manners, refinement of sentiment, gentleness of speech, modesty in feeling and action”—does more than set out a nearly impossible standard for women’s behavior. The terms she uses also evoke the travel genre and implicitly criticize Wright’s travel writing as well as her unfeminine demeanor. “Appearance and Manners” are not only the superficial concerns to which women should devote themselves, but are also the acceptable content of women’s travel writing, as we saw in chapter 2 with the discussion of the decidedly different political travel writing of Anne Royall. Wright shares with Royall an overwhelming focus on politics and the workings of government, eschewing expectations that women’s writing focus on “sentiment.” Outspoken in her critique of European social, economic, and political practice and in her celebration of American democracy, Wright is neither gentle nor modest as she proclaims herself a twenty-three-year-old sage fit to judge and evaluate nations. But while Beecher sees Wright as a traitor to femininity disguised in “the shape of a woman,” Wright and her travel writing in fact unveil a citizen with a female body.

Breaking with the prevailing school of European “grumbletonians” (16) who find only fault with the young upstart nation, Wright instead depicts America as “the very palladium of liberty” (81), including lengthy and detailed explanations of the plan and workings of the United States government—everything from the “history of the Federal Party” (172) to the Declaration of Independence (53). Her extensive discussions of the plan of American government present an idealized picture of the liberating potential of democracy. In Wright’s view, liberation will inevitably extend to women who “are assuming their place as thinking beings” in the new republic (218). The political participation of women is the likely, if not inevitable, outcome of Wright’s utopian vision.

Wright constructs not only a new world, but also a new female traveler. Traveling is no longer the exclusive province of “a preux chevalier, in olden time, setting forth in a new suit of armor, buckled on by the hand of a princess, [seeking] adventure through the wide world”
(91). Wright rejects chivalry, with its underlying assumptions of female weakness, claiming instead the masculine prerogative of “adventure through the wide world” for herself. The image of the roving knight is replaced by that of the “peaceful traveller of these generations, who goes to seek waterfalls instead of giants and to look at men instead of killing them” (91). Usurping the perspective of the masculine explorer, Wright asserts her competence as a female traveler and claims a wider sphere of “adventure” and public activity for women.

A female explorer setting out to discover a country that already exists, to project onto it her own constructions of freedom and equality, Wright romanticizes American politics, economics, citizens, and attitudes toward women, all in service to her utopian vision. Critic Paul Baker suggests the limits of Wright’s representation, “distorted as it was by her prejudices and enthusiasms.” In Wright’s text, according to Baker, “The spotless cities and smiling countryside of the East . . . [are] viewed through the distorting lens of classical imagery.” While Baker notes that modern readers may find Wright’s hyperbole “sometimes difficult or impossible to accept,” I argue that for Wright accuracy takes second place to finding (and creating if she has to) a place where women can be citizens.

For Wright, America is “a country where the dreams of sages, smiled at as utopian, seem distinctly realized” (188). Describing America as “animated” by the “spirit of liberty” (169), Wright compares the new nation to a “young Rome” that she envisions taking its place among the great republics of history (261). American government represents a “triumph of virtue and good sense over the vices and follies of human nature” (171). America’s economic and political systems are egalitarian and extend to every citizen, regardless of birth or social position. The result, according to Wright, is a country of equals rather than a nation of masters and servants, “where all men are placed by the laws on an exact level” (237). Class distinctions are not erased under the American system, but are based on “education and condition” rather than on aristocratic lineage (237). Meritocracy replaces aristocracy in the new nation, Wright asserts, and her construction of America as a land of economic and social opportunity sets the stage for her argument that women should be the next group to benefit from the political advances of the American system of government.

Wright imagines a future full of possibility for women, rather than increasing limitations on what they can do and where they can go. She
declares, “It would be impossible for women to stand in higher estimation than they do” in America (218–19). Emphasizing the “public attention” focused on “the improvement of female education,” Wright lauds America’s “liberal philosophy” and the consequent place the nation “award[s] to women” (218). Of course, by “women” Wright means white, middle-class women like herself. Her description of New York City having “neither poor nor uneducated” residents, for instance, indicates that her focus is mainly on the middle class. And her observations on “Appearance and Manners of the Young Women” are chiefly drawn from studying “large evening assemblies,” social events attended by girls wearing “showy and costly” dresses (21–24). The reforms Wright advocates, particularly women’s education, would primarily benefit white, middle-class women, fitting them to participate in public life. It is not until later in Wright’s life that she will work for abolition and working-class labor reform, issues directly affecting black and poor women.

For the new nation to achieve its utopian potential, in Wright’s view, it must continue to foster the development of women both educationally and politically. Wright notes that the country owes its independence to women who contributed to the Revolutionary War: “The women shared the patriotism of the men . . . actually buckling on the swords and cartridges and arming the hands of their sons and husbands” (183). Her argument here echoes Royall’s celebratory portrait of female Revolutionary War heroine Ann Bailey, whom Royall includes in her text to support her underlying theme of women’s fitness for citizenship. It is important that Wright’s discussion of women does not appear until page 218 of her 270-page text, because she spends the first three-quarters of her narrative constructing a nation where women can eventually participate in governing and in citizenship. She has built her utopia with the object of populating it with white, middle-class women.

The final barrier to women’s participation in the public life of the new nation is education, an issue Wright addresses by advancing in her travel text her own “utopian plan of national education” for women (222). While she leaves the particulars to “the republic herself,” she outlines the basic components of education that will be needed by the future female citizens of the nation (222). Arguing that women should be taught “the principles of government, and the obligations of patriotism,” Wright advocates a system of education that will fit women to
participate in civic life (23). She initially camouflages her radical call for political education for women by framing it in terms of republican motherhood. According to Wright, “In a country where a mother is charged with the formation of an infant mind that is to be called in future to judge of the laws and support the liberties of a republic, the mother herself should well understand those laws and estimate those liberties” (218). But even when cast in terms of supplementing women’s traditional role as mothers, Wright’s demand for women’s education radically critiques the existing educational systems in the United States and Europe. Pointing to the “European manner” of educating women that focuses on “personal accomplishments and the more ornamental branches of knowledge,” Wright calls for a reformed system that emphasizes “solid information” (218). Her plan for female education would replace studies of “French, Italian, dancing, [and] drawing” with “philosophy, history, political economy, and the exact sciences” in order to produce women of “powerful intellect” who could engage the political and social issues of the day (218). While Wright does not advocate female suffrage in her text, she is clearly advocating reform that would produce educated women suited to assume the responsibilities of both citizenship and public administration. Ironically, Beecher shares Wright’s focus on women’s education, having founded three schools for the instruction of women. Needless to say, Beecher’s curriculum is quite different.

Women’s bodies, as well as their minds, need cultivation to fit them for citizenship. Wright’s plan for female education is not limited to introducing “solid information,” but also includes a physical education component (218). Linking mental and physical development, Wright declares that “to invigorate the body is to invigorate the mind” and that women need to pursue both mental and physical exercise (220). Linking mental and physical independence, Wright identifies sexism in the cultural tenet that women remain physically weak and mentally passive: “The vanity [of men is] soothed by the dependence of women: it pleases them better to find in their companion a fragile vine, clinging to their firm trunk for support, than a vigorous tree with whose branches they may mingle theirs” (221). Rather than clinging vines, women need to be physically powerful and self-reliant if they want to assume their place as citizens of the new republic. Wright’s program of physical education, advocating that women “be taught in early youth to excel in the race, to hit a mark, to swim, and in short to use every
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exercise,” is designed to “impart vigor to their frames and independence to their minds,” and signals a radical departure from traditional gender roles (222). The notion of mobility is important here, as women running and jumping represent movement across social and physical boundaries. Their bodies and minds are vehicles for the advancement of womankind and the new nation. Wright’s own travels throughout the Northeast and Midwest illustrate the mental and physical vigor she describes. She models her new woman-citizen on herself; she is the thinking, active woman who will assume her rightful place in the halls of American democracy.

“Brazen Front and Brawny Arms”:  
Risking Danger and Performing Unfemininity

Describing Wright’s “great masculine person,” Beecher embellishes her portrait with “brazen front and brawny arms,” as if Wright has followed her own program of physical fitness to an extreme. Beecher’s word portrait, however, certainly does not match contemporary likenesses of the attractive and unmuscled Wright. Rather than accurately representing Wright’s body, Beecher follows the logic of “embodied deviance,” Jennifer Terry and Jacqueline Urla’s term for the nineteenth-century ideology that figured social transgressions as a mark or disfigurement on the transgressor’s body. According to Beecher, Wright’s unfeminine behavior—“mingling with men in stormy debate, and standing up with barefaced impudence, to lecture to a public assembly”—blurs the line between masculinity and femininity. Beecher finds this gender-blurring particularly unsettling because she locates power for white, middle-class women in their essential difference from men. Notions of women’s moral superiority and innate capacity for nurturing granted women like Beecher a certain amount of leeway to enter the public sphere in the name of expanding the moral influence of the home outward into the community and the nation. Beecher therefore jealously guards the power she gains by promoting her version of femininity and policing the behavior of other women. She labels Wright’s behavior masculine to guarantee that it will be off-limits to other middle-class white women. Wright, in contrast, argues that male and female are equal rather than different, a philosophy she believes will gain women greater power as
citizens than they can exercise from the confines of a moral domestic sphere.

Femininity is a performance, as feminist theorist Judith Butler argues and as Beecher’s list of appropriate feminine behavior demonstrates, and Wright will not limit herself to the scripts of domesticity and subservience. Wright seeks to redraw the social boundaries that limit women’s behavior and autonomy, making space in restrictive definitions of femininity for the kind of public life she lives and that she claims for future women citizens. Demonstrating what educated, outspoken, mobile women can accomplish, she performs unfemininity, providing audiences with a model of expanded roles for women that complement the utopian vision of her travel writing. Travel is a crucial part of Wright’s unfeminine behavior, as travel often requires women to demonstrate the physical strength, quick thinking, and independence that violate the expected performance of femininity. Performing unfemininity instead, Wright and other ragged-edge travelers work to expand possibilities for women and to rewrite the meaning attached to their traveling female bodies.

Wright recognizes the ways in which perceptions of women’s physical weakness limit their mobility and autonomy. Cultural ideas that emphasize women’s physical and sexual vulnerability work to confine women to the safe space of the home, effectively cowing them by what critic Kristi Siegel terms the “rhetoric of peril.” It is that rhetoric, the constant repetition of stories of rape and physical harm suffered by women outside the home, rather than the women’s actual physical weakness, that limits where they can go, as Wright argues:

I apprehend that thousands of our countrywomen in the middle ranks, whose mothers, or certainly whose grandmothers, could ride unattended from the Land’s End to the border and walk abroad alone or with an unmarried friend of the other sex armed with all the unsuspecting virtue of Eve before her fall—I apprehend that the children and grandchildren of these matrons are now condemned to walk in leading strings from the cradle to the altar, if not to the grave, taught to see in the other sex a race of seducers rather than protectors and of masters rather than companions. (219)

Women’s abilities have not changed; they could still ride the length of the countryside. The difference, according to Wright, is a shift in
cultural ideas about women—they are no longer able to take care of themselves when they “ride unattended” or “walk alone,” but instead are limited by both fear of seduction (or more frightening still, rape) and the increased control of men who install themselves as “masters.” Since women are “condemned to walk in leading strings” from birth until marriage and beyond, the goal of the scare tactics is to preserve their virginity, marriageability, and, ultimately, docility. Indoctrinating women to believe in and practice their subordination to men, the “rhetoric of peril” centers on limiting women’s physical movement. Let them wander, the logic goes, and there’s going to be trouble. Wright and her fellow ragged-edge travelers suggest just how much trouble uncontrolled, mobile women can get into—Seacole endures racist taunts from ship stewards, and a toast ostensibly in her honor declares that bleaching would be her best route to social acceptance; Royall sparks so much controversy and outrage that she’s thrown down icy steps, breaking her leg, and on another occasion is horsewhipped by another angry opponent of her outspoken opinions.15

Scenes of physical danger in Wright’s text highlight female travelers’ simultaneous competence and vulnerability, a representational strategy also found in later texts and throughout those included in Traveling Economies. By representing her own body facing and overcoming physical danger, Wright contests the “rhetoric of peril,” even as scenes of risk also draw attention to her vulnerable and out-of-place female form. These episodes focus attention on the writers’ female bodies by describing their unexpected and unfeminine stamina and skill (as in the case of Bradley riding her mule on treacherous cliff sides in the first chapter). The rugged nature of most early-nineteenth-century transportation frequently made travel dangerous for both men and women. Recounting successful negotiations of life-threatening situations, women writers argue for their fitness as travelers and present important counterevidence to the prevalent stereotype that white, middle-class women were weak, timid, and unintelligent and were therefore justifiably confined to the relative safety of hearth and home.

Describing a near plunge down the Genesee Falls in upstate New York, Wright displays not only her physical strength and quick thinking, but also her vulnerability and impulsiveness. Wright and her female companions descend down the side of the falls to perch on a narrow ledge “formed by the roots of a blasted pine” (116–17). The adventure produces in Wright “a sensation of terror that I do not remember to have
felt in an equal degree more than once in my life” (117). The women then make a narrow escape from the precipice:

Our sight sw[am], our ears filled with the stunning roar of the river, the smoke of whose waters rose even to this dizzy height, while the thin coating of soil which covered the rock and had once afforded a scanty nourishment to the blasted tree which sustained us seemed to shake beneath our feet . . . To restore our confused senses and save ourselves from losing balance, which had been the loss of life, we grasped the old pine with considerable energy, and it was at last, with trembling knees and eyes steadily fixed upon our footsteps, neither daring to look up nor down, that we regained the height from which we had descended. Having regained it, I thought we never looked more like fools in our lives. (117–18)

The episode focuses the reader’s attention on the vulnerable female bodies clinging to the cliff, hanging on despite their trembling limbs and unsure footing. Nonetheless, the women do survive, rescuing themselves without the help of male guardians and displaying their strength, courage, and competence, if not their prudence, in going down the precipice in the first place. Risking their lives “to see what [they] could,” Wright claims the daring and adventure that was usually reserved for male travelers (117).

Even though Wright survives the danger and lives to write about it, the description of the near slip down the falls draws the reader’s attention to her female body, for although she and her party demonstrate their “considerable energy” and strength, which succeeds in restoring them to safety, the incident nonetheless emphasizes their out-of-place-ness as much as it does their traveling competence. The moment, then, offers readers an opportunity to question whether women traveling alone (or in a group of other women without men) is a good idea, a question that a male traveler who sees the women almost fall to their death in fact asks directly, as Wright records in her text: “A young man, who the next day become our fellow traveller, told me that he had seen us take this position [on the precipice] with such alarm that his blood ran cold” (118). Couched as chivalrous fear for the women’s safety, the male traveler’s words reinforce the rhetoric of peril (see what trouble women get into on their own?). Women travel writers had to walk a fine line between sharing a thrill with their audience and alienating
them with accounts of their unfeminine, risky behavior. Travel readers expected at least a few brushes with danger, and female authors may have felt market pressure to meet those expectations, regardless of their gender. Women travelers in peril could titillate a leering audience and thereby sell more books. Yet women authors were taking a writerly risk by portraying their own daring; they could either engage readers or shock them. Examining other representations of physical danger on the road or ship or mule begins to answer whether the writerly risk was worth the publishing danger. Comparing similar scenes in ragged-edge travel texts exposes the variety of hazards women travelers confronted and the complex ways that female authors used moments of danger to craft their self-representations. Ultimately, women authors could not control their readers’ or fellow travelers’ responses to their traveling bodies, and such scenes serve to reinforce the constant scrutiny women travelers underwent on the road and on the page.

As a female traveler, Wright was conspicuous; her female body attracted as much attention as, if not more than, her words. As discussed in chapter 1 of *Traveling Economies*, Amy Morris Bradley and Nancy Prince both include accounts of the scrutiny they endured while traveling alone. Bradley’s interrogation by fellow passengers who helped her over a bout of seasickness demonstrates how chivalry thinly disguised the true purpose of monitoring women’s movement and behavior. The social scrutiny that Nancy Prince experienced was much more sinister and threatening. A black woman traveling alone, Prince was threatened with enslavement and beating when her ship docked at a Southern port. While black women travelers could be particularly conspicuous, white women’s mobility could also bring them to the attention of a culture that preferred women to stay at home. Hoop skirts and black faces drew attention when in places they were not expected to be, such as on steamships or in railcars. While chapter 1 investigated why women travelers (particularly ragged-edge women travelers) elicited a strong reaction from their fellow passengers and even from their readers, Wright invites us to ask how and why women travelers represent their own bodies in their travel accounts. Wright is not really surprised by her own strength when she scrambles off her dangerous scenic overlook of the falls; instead, she shows her audience her strong female body in order to rewrite the meaning that the culture reads there.

We have seen how women travelers sometimes cushion their transgressive adventurous behavior by deploying femininity—insisting on
their respectable manners and dress, for example, as Mary Seacole does in Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands (discussed in chapter 1). Despite female travelers’ gender-bending behavior, an exaggerated performance of femininity can support status quo women’s subordination by reinforcing cultural ideas about proper behavior for women. While women travelers do sometimes deploy “proper” femininity strategically in their texts, at other moments they challenge gender norms by performing unfemininity. They demonstrate their strength, competence, and will, qualities that serve them well not only when rescuing themselves from a slip over the falls, but also in the public life Wright envisions as women’s future. Rewriting the meaning supposedly written on women’s bodies, women travelers challenge the rhetoric of peril, with its emphasis on bodily vulnerability and traveling incompetence. Later tourism will erase their subversion and redouble the power of the rhetoric of peril to sell more chaperoned tours and contain the problematic social and physical mobility of women like Wright.

Seacole would at first glance seem to be almost nothing like Frances Wright. A self-described Jamaican mulatto, Seacole traveled through Central America and to the Crimean battlefront thirty years after Wright’s journey to the United States. What Seacole and Wright share are similar strategies for representing their own fitness for citizenship and public life. A comparison of Wright and Seacole illuminates aspects of Wonderful Adventures that would otherwise be obscured and traces textual strategies across the emerging field of antebellum women’s travel writing. Wright’s plan for women’s physical education and her own successful negotiation of the perils of travel support her plan for women to become active members of America’s democracy. Seacole’s project is complicated by race, as she works to deconstruct negative racial stereotypes and restrictive gender norms. Showing her black, mobile female body surviving the deadly hazards of the Crimean battlefront, Seacole claims space for women travelers in the most masculine of public spaces—a war zone.

In chapter 1 we observed Seacole’s performance of femininity in Central America as she described her fashionable dress and decorum. Once she arrives at the Crimean battlefront in the second half of Wonderful Adventures, her portrayal of her body and her unfeminine behavior highlight her determination and success as a traveler. Seacole climbs aboard a ship stocked with munitions—docked in the Black Sea to con-
vey supplies to the battlefront—and encounters a mode of transportation designed with the male body, rather than an ample female form, in mind: “Time and trouble combined have left me with a well-filled-out, portly form—the envy of many an angular Yankee female—and, more than once, it was in no slight danger of becoming too intimately acquainted with the temperature of the Bosphorus” (86). The picture of Seacole almost falling into the water provides a moment of comic relief before the narrative proceeds to the description of more life-threatening situations “under fire” at the front lines (157). Even in this comic moment, however, the discussion of physical danger shifts the focus onto her body, which—black, female, portly, overdressed—should not be climbing up the side of a ship near a battlefront, or anywhere else for that matter. She is trespassing into the masculine war zone, and her presence threatens her own safety, as well as the stability of socially prescribed gender roles. With every trip up the ship’s ladder, Seacole successfully negotiates another barrier to black women’s mobility and freedom. The negotiation is often difficult and perilous, as both the Bosphorus and society wait for her to misstep. Perhaps the next time they meet her in person in a remote corner of the globe or on the streets of London, she will not be an oddity, and she will not be the only woman traveling.

An unplanned bath in the Bosphorus is only the beginning of the dangers Seacole faces in the Crimean battlefront. Her independence and determination continue to serve her well, but the stakes are clearly higher the longer she remains “unprotected” in a war zone (112). Increasing the danger to herself and defying gender constructions, Seacole risks her life by journeying to the front lines of the war. She leads her mules laden with refreshments and medical supplies, gaining entry into the nexus of masculine power and violence—the battle sites. Mother Seacole’s portly form would seem to be totally unsuited for dodging bullets, “but each time [her] bag of bandages and comforts for the wounded proved [her] passport” (157). While her womanly mission of mercy gains her access to this dangerous masculine arena, her survival of the gunfire challenges the widely held notion that women are weak, timid, and unsuited to the rigors of battle (or public life, for that matter). Bandaging wounds and selling sandwiches, Seacole fearlessly serves on the front lines, painting a vivid picture of her black female body diving for cover: “I was ‘under fire.’ More frequently than was agreeable, a shot would come ploughing up the ground and raising clouds of dust, or
a shell whizz above us . . . and with very undignified and unladylike haste I had to embrace the earth and remain there” (157). The dictates of the battlefront require the performance of unfemininity, or in Seacole’s terms, an “unladylike,” but successful, duck and cover.

Surrounded by death and danger, Seacole not only enters the war zone, but also copes with it more successfully than many of the male combatants. Her only wound during the entire Crimean campaign is a dislocated thumb, which “did not inconvenience” Seacole, although it “never returned to its proper shape” (158). A slightly scarred battle veteran, Seacole moves through the forbidden territory of the front lines, collecting shell casings for souvenirs (171). Describing herself as “a lioness in the streets of Simpheropol,” she trades feminine docility, domesticity, and fear for unfeminine strength, self-determination, and mobility (190).

“I Cannot Conceive of Anything in the Shape of a Woman, More Intolerably Offensive and Disgusting”: Representing “Other” Bodies

While Seacole dodges the bullets of race and gender, Wright puts her own body and those of other white, middle-class women front and center in her imagined democratic utopia. Despite her plan for female education (including physical education for stronger female bodies to complement stronger female minds), an education gap was not the only problem preventing the full public participation of women in the fledgling democracy. Political and social injustices, particularly the enslavement of African-Americans, threatened to destroy Wright’s utopian vision and the nation itself. Wright does decry slavery in her travel text—an early call for abolition, given the 1821 publication date. Furthermore, she follows up with her own abolition activism, founding Nashoba, an experimental abolition colony that intended to educate, manumit, and resettle freed slaves outside the United States. Critic Carolyn Karcher celebrates Wright’s “intrepidity that led her to act publicly against slavery at great personal and financial risk, nearly a decade before either the formation of a radical abolitionist movement . . . or the rise of women antislavery writers and speakers.” While Wright may have been daring and high-minded in her proabolition
writing and activism, a fundamental flaw limits the efficacy as well as the humanity of her theory and later practice. In *Views* Wright dismisses and ignores the problematic bodies of African-Americans, limiting her physical travel through the United States by canceling a Southern leg of her tour and blaming blacks for their own victimization. In fact her travel writing celebrates the mobility and independence of traveling white, middle-class women at the expense of African-Americans, an agenda that had disastrous consequences for the slaves who were victimized by Nashoba when Wright actually put her travel text’s theories into action.

*View’s* rhetorical construction of the United States as the land of the free fails Wright, finally, when she confronts the real-world injustice of slavery, as her constructed utopia threatens to disintegrate in the face of the “impure breath of [slavery’s] pestilence” (267). The “free winds of America” that Wright imagines allowing white, middle-class women to soar to new heights of personal and political freedom are tainted by the “odious” presence of slavery, which represents the complete denial of liberty (267). If African-Americans could be denied citizenship and human rights based on their skin color, then women could be denied political participation on the basis of gender. The meritocracy that Wright envisions allowing women to enter public life on the basis of their education and refinement crumbles in the face of a society that accords the full benefits of democracy to only a few wealthy white men. Wright recognizes the threat that slavery poses to her potential utopia and ultimately avoids directly confronting the injustice that her vision cannot brook. Refusing to travel to the South and downplaying Northern racism, she can preserve her utopian vision only by ignoring the institutionalized racism of the land of “freedom for all.” She admits, in fact, that she has “ever felt a secret reluctance to visit” the Southern states, and curtails her physical journey through the new nation (267). Avoiding a direct confrontation with the “breath of evil” that threatens the nation and her utopian view thereof, Wright upholds America as a land of opportunity and freedom, rather than representing the undeniable oppression and exploitation that also mark the new republic (267).

Wright goes so far as to argue that race prejudice no longer exists, turning away from the realities of race politics in America. She finds “much satisfaction [in] the condition of the negro” in the Northeast and chooses to “rejoice in this visible decay of prejudice” rather “than to
dwell on what remains” in the rest of the Union (42). Wright further de-emphasizes the effects of race prejudice by suggesting that free blacks in the Northeast enjoy conditions that make social elevation possible and likely. According to Wright, free blacks “are equally under the protection of mild and impartial laws,” and opportunities abound for economic success: “Nothing indeed is here necessary but his own exertions to raise him in the scale of being” (44). Nancy Prince and Mary Ann Shadd Cary provide compelling counterevidence about the pernicious results of racism on free black communities through their travel narratives, as discussed in the first and third chapters.

Justifying the fact that very few “Africans” have, in fact, taken advantage of the opportunities that she imagines are so abundant, Wright enumerates stereotyped character flaws that inhibit black progress: “greater laxity of morals,” “[un]frugal,” “singularly cheerful and good humoured,” and “immoderately fond of dancing” (43–44). In a later description of black domestic servants, Wright adds “indolence,” “intemperance,” and “petty dishonesty” to her list of racial character defects (238), thus absolving the fledgling republic of responsibility for its African-American citizens and placing the blame on those citizens themselves rather than on institutionalized racism and slavery.

However, describing America’s democratic political system, in which “every individual has an equal sovereignty,” Wright must acknowledge that slavery is “a grievous exception to this rule” (188). Although her acknowledgment of slavery is made here only in a footnote to the main body of her text, it does signal the profound challenge that slavery presents to her view of America. The institutionalized denial of human dignity and human rights sanctioned in slavery jeopardizes the claims of women to status as full and equal human beings and citizens, dimming the brightness of America’s utopian potential:

Had you studied with me the history and character of the American republic, did you see in her so many seeds of excellence, so bright a dawning of national glory, so fair a promise of a brilliant meridian day, as your friend imagines that she can discern, you would share all that regret, impatience, and anxiety, with which she regards every stain that rests upon her morals, every danger that threatens her peace. (270)

Found in the final paragraph of Views of Society and Manners, this admis-
sion of a fundamental flaw in the republic is minimized by Wright, who trumpets the optimistic view that “the day is not very far distant when a slave will not be found in America!” (270). Once slavery’s “stain” is washed from the new nation, in the literal form of the removal of problematic black bodies, its utopian potential can be realized.

While Wright works to erase problematic bodies and to put her own in the spotlight, other women travel writers use the bodies of racial and class “others” to mitigate their readers’ response to their unfeminine behavior. Objectifying other women even as they contest cultural notions that they should be only domestic ornaments themselves, the authors undermine their argument that travel is liberating and empowering. Instead, these authors rely on the same hierarchies of race, class, and gender that marginalize them to claim power over those below them on the social ladder. Travel may be a source of freedom for these women, who, as we have seen, have the courage, stamina, and determination to travel in spite of the social and physical dangers; however, they are willing to sacrifice other women for the sake of their own hard-won liberation.

Anne Royall and Mary Seacole, for instance, both use the bodies of other women to buttress their own claims to feminine respectability, despite their transgressive behavior. Even though she figures the ship’s saloon as a model of egalitarian democracy, Royall also relies on racist and classist depictions of women and immigrants to reinforce her own authority as a writer. Very likely due to her marginal class position, Royall makes an effort in her text to distinguish herself from women she deems inferior. For instance, although Royall wore the same threadbare dress during the entire period she researched her Sketches, she presents poor women as fundamentally different from herself. On seeing a destitute woman, Royall declares, “O poverty, to what shifts art thou reduced! I looked at her and shuddered!” (95). Royall’s own experiences of extreme poverty do not temper her response. While her sentimental language is charged with emotion, the poor woman’s plight evokes revulsion rather than sympathy. Royall works to disassociate herself from poor women because poverty was frequently linked to immorality by nineteenth-century social ideology, and she would risk losing her slippery grasp on middle-class femininity and respectability by revealing her own brushes with poverty. In her study of “the economically comfortable American woman” traveling abroad, Mary Suzanne Schriber finds similar representations of foreign women peas-
ants: “[The wealthy female tourist] is able to see in ‘them’ her worst nightmare [of lower-class status]. She counters her fear by underscoring ‘their’ difference simultaneously magnifying and securing her superior place.” The difference is that Royall’s vehemence instead stems from her own closeness to the poor woman she describes; she is separated from her by neither nationality nor economic security. 21

While we might expect white women like Royall to use racially different women as foils to bolster their questionable femininity, Seacole’s use of negative portraits of traveling white women is a surprising strategy designed to combat racial stereotypes. Seacole jealously guards her claim to femininity by comparing her own decorum with the license white women take with gender expectations: for instance, the white women on the Central American overland route to the Gold Rush “appeared in no hurry to resume the dress or obligations of their sex. Many were clothed as their men were, in flannel shirt and boots; rode their mules in unfeminine fashion . . . and in their conversation successfully rivalled the coarseness of their lords” (20). Seacole equates feminine “dress” and “obligations”; her own adherence to conventional dress standards signals to her audience her adherence to conventional morality, despite her unconventional mobility. She presents herself as a moral agent of femininity who is not tainted by her experience of independence and travel. Seacole attempts to reduce the threat of women’s increasing participation in public life by presenting herself as morally unscathed by her journey.

Seacole contests the “deviance” culturally assigned to her by emphasizing her own high moral standards. While she does not completely reject “the idea that moral character is rooted in the body,” she challenges the social structures that construct black women as always already deviant. 22 Thus, as critics Farah Griffin and Cheryl Fish assert, it is important that “Seacole must distinguish herself from the ‘camp followers’ and prostitutes” in Panama and Crimea. 23 By locating deviance in the bodies of white traveling women, Seacole disrupts the systems of power that construct “whole categories of people [as] fundamentally deviant, not by virtue of particular symptoms they manifest, but simply because of their subordinate location in systems for distinguishing gender, ethnicity, class, and race.” 24 Her emphasis on traveling white women’s lack of femininity deconstructs the idea that femininity is tied to biology or, more specifically, to a particular race. In her text Seacole can then construct herself as feminine, even more feminine than women
whose skin color should grant them the privilege and status of middle-
class womanhood. She deflects attention from her black female body,
and the deviance her audience would read there, by focusing on the
inappropriate bodies of traveling white women.

Is She “Free from Private Vices”?  
Troubling Sexuality and the Female Traveler

Since Wright was “going about unprotected, and feeling no need of
protection,” her trespass against proper femininity is cast by Beecher
in terms explicitly associated with women’s travel and linked to travel-
ing women’s sexuality. Women traveling unaccompanied by men were
referred to as “unprotected,” a term that was code for, among other
potential weaknesses, sexual vulnerability. Unmoored from the safety
and confinement of the snug harbor of home, women travelers would
encounter men, a circumstance that could compromise their sexual
purity, through rape or seduction. Emerging ideologies of white, mid-
class women’s “passionlessness”—a term used by historian Nancy
Cott to describe the denial of sexuality that was necessary to reinforce
ideas of women’s moral superiority—were at odds with the mobility
and independence of women travelers. Women who would put their
reputations and their bodies in jeopardy might as well be guilty of
“private vices,” as Beecher snidely suggests.

Royall’s efforts to establish her respectability stem from her first-
hand knowledge of popular conceptions of women travelers. In her Letters Royall includes a reference to prevailing views of traveling females:
“What are you travelling alone for? It is a bad sign—you must be a
bad woman” (217). In response, Royall continues to emphasize her
high moral standards throughout her Sketches. Encountering a group
of women in New York City’s prison, she makes an effort to distance
herself from their corrupt influence, as well as their low status: “They
were the most abandoned, vicious, lewd, impudent . . . alas! for frail
woman. They laughed, they romped, they giggled [sic], and saluted me
with the familiarity of an old acquaintance! asked ‘if i came to keep
them company?’ I would have suffered the guillotine first” (252). Royall
assigns deviant sexuality to the women prisoners using terms of vulner-
ability (“frail”) and of vulgarity (“romp,” “giggle,” “familiarity”). She
reserves for herself, the “proper” woman traveler, not only propriety, but the stance of social judge. Royall charges the women not only with being “lewd,” but also with failing all standards of middle-class womanhood—decorum, modesty, and reserve. She, by contrast, is a proper middle-class woman who would rather lose her head than be lumped in with “bad” women. Royall’s later sensational trial as a “common scold” (discussed in chapter 2) did actually land her briefly in jail and almost resulted in torture on a ducking stool built specifically for her. And even as she wrote about the women prisoners, she was herself evading debtors’ prison in her home state of Virginia, a fact she conveniently overlooks in her discussion of lawbreaking women.

Black women, even before they traveled, were perceived as sexual objects and ascribed overblown and predatory sexuality. Seacole was familiar with racist assumptions about black female sexuality, and thus made a concerted effort to assert her own purity and respectability in order to challenge and debunk the stereotypes. While Seacole worked to dismantle the hypersexual image assigned to black women by the popular imagination, Wright in her controversial and outspoken discussions of free love extends her program for women’s sexual emancipation at the expense of black women by reinforcing the debilitating Jezebel stereotype.

For Beecher, Wright’s most objectionable travels take her out of polite society and into the realm of expressed female sexuality. “Feeling no need of protection,” as Beecher would have it, Wright rejects the image of middle-class women as passionless or helpless and argues instead for women to express their sexuality without the restriction and servitude of marriage. In so doing, she commits, in Beecher’s estimation, “broad attacks on all those principles that protect the purity, the dignity, and the safety of her sex.” To choose mobility and sexual autonomy over safety and domesticity is evidence of Wright’s pathology (“offensive and disgusting”), and her popularity threatens to spread her “private vices” to other women. More women might suffer contagion if women travelers continue to circulate unchecked through antebellum America. Joining Beecher in denouncing Wright, the Advocate of Moral Reform, another media source, dramatizes the contagious effect of her immorality during her previous lecture tour:

Wives, once happy in their husbands’ arms, seduced by her diabolical doctrines, parted from the peaceful and lovely paths of virtue and
affection at home, strayed in to the mazy meanderings of sinful pleasure, abandoned themselves to indiscriminate indulgence in libidinous practices, and are now among the mass of moral putrefaction that tenant the temples of infamy.  

Wright’s critics again link an image of travel, “mazy meanderings,” with her “libidinous practices,” connecting traveling women with immorality that promises to spread wherever they go.

Wright’s most controversial ideas about female sexuality were not spread through her lecture tours, where she expressed the ideas much more subtly, but in the pages of the *New Harmony Gazette* (which she would soon buy and rename the *Free Enquirer*), in response to a series of scandals at her abolitionist colony, Nashoba. Wright’s colony was intended to provide a model for the education, vocational training, and eventual colonization of slaves that would solve the problem of the “stain” of slavery on the nation. Instead, the marshy, mosquito-ridden location; inadequate slave labor-force (made up primarily of slave women and young children); mismanagement and limited farming knowledge of the white trustees and residents; and Wright’s frequent and extended absences to raise much-needed funding turned the utopian project into a dystopian nightmare in which slaves were beaten and exploited. Answering charges that slaves were being beaten, that the white overseer had taken a slave woman as a concubine, that Wright’s sister was practicing free love with another white male resident, and that Isabella, a female slave, had suffered an attempted rape by a male slave, Wright took the occasion to explain her theory of female sexuality rather than to address the exploitation occurring at Nashoba.

Wright’s “Explanatory Notes on Nashoba” showcases her groundbreaking early feminist theory as well as the disastrous and damaging limitations of her exclusive focus on white, middle-class women. Wright’s notion of white, middle-class women’s independence included her formulation of women’s sexual independence. Wright endorsed the doctrine of free love, as Elizabeth Bartlett notes: “Wright advocated that rather than shrouding their bodies, desires, and faculties, women address them openly,” a philosophy that shocked her Victorian audience, whose “dictums of propriety . . . rendered the mere mention of an arm or leg indecent.” At a time when white, middle-class women were “viewed as having no bodies at all” and considered to be without sexual feeling or passion, Wright’s emphasis on women’s expressed
sexuality was radical. Believing that this expression was natural and necessary, Wright argues for rethinking accepted notions of morality and for sanctioning sexual passion in her “Explanatory Notes”: “Let us not teach, that virtue consists in the crucifying of the affections and appetites, but in their judicious government! Let us not attach ideas of purity to monastic chastity, impossible to man or woman without consequences fraught with evil, nor ideas of vice to connexions formed under the auspices of kind feeling!” This statement is included in a section justifying Nashoba’s repudiation of marriage and advocacy of free love, or sexual union founded on “mutual inclination” rather than on matrimonial or legal compulsion.33

Wright’s insistence that “the marriage law . . . is of no force within [the] pale” of Nashoba is meant to secure white, middle-class women’s freedom within the bounds of the colony. Wright argues for this independence by saying, “No woman can forfeit her individual rights or independent existence, and no man assert over her any rights or power whatsoever, beyond what he may exercise over her free and voluntary affections.” Free to express their sexuality, according to Wright, women should no longer be “condemned to the unnatural repression of feelings and desires.” She links the end of sexual repression with the end of the sexual double standard that “condemn[s] one portion of the female sex to vicious excess, another to as vicious restraint . . . and generally the male sex to debasing licentiousness.” Wright seeks to undermine the power of institutionalized sexual mores and, with them, institutionalized gender inequity.34

The colony’s response (and Wright’s lack of response) to the attempted rape of Isabel, a slave woman at Nashoba, demonstrates how the policies that Wright supported at Nashoba secured the sexual freedom and bodily self-control of white women at the expense of the slave women she was ostensibly trying to assist. Reporting the near rape to the white trustees of Nashoba, Isabel requests a lock for her door to prevent future attacks. The trustees refuse her request. Declaring the “proper basis of the sexual intercourse to be the unconstrained and unrestrained choice of both parties,” Camilla Wright denies Isabel the lock in order to promote an ideal of mutual respect and community, “which will give to every woman a much greater security, than any lock can possibly do.” But the freedom of sexual choice that Camilla and Wright claim as their prerogative is based on an assumption of bodily and sexual integrity that is not the experience of all women. The Wright sisters enjoy privilege as white, middle-class women, which offers them
a level of protection from sexual abuse and violence. For slave women like Isabel, however, control of their bodies and their sexuality is not assured. The refusal of the lock for Isabel’s door after repeated threats and an actual attack clearly favors Camilla’s expression of female desire (taking a lover) over Isabel’s desire for bodily integrity and safety. Moreover, the response to Isabel’s request for a lock on some level sees Isabel, a black woman, a slave whose body and sexuality are property, as unrapeable. Nashoba provides the occasion for Wright’s expression of female desire, and that message is privileged over the sexual integrity of a slave woman.

As Deborah Gray White notes in her discussion of the stereotype of the slave woman as “Jezebel,” black women are always present in constructions of white female sexuality, lurking as the dark, sexualized foil to white women’s virtue. Wright, despite her abolitionist project, does not succeed in revising sexual stereotypes of black women, relying on them instead to secure her own sexual freedom. She borrows this strategy from her earlier portrayal of African-Americans in her travel writing—and her later feminism continues to depend on race privilege that reinforces status quo social power structures. Wright’s travel writing and her radical philosophy and reform work are linked by both their vision of liberation for middle-class white women and their failure to include diverse women in their formulation of Woman’s Rights. Despite her pioneering journeys across social boundaries, then, Wright’s flawed attempts to change cultural scripts of femininity and sexuality ultimately fail.

While Wright co-opts female slave bodies in service to her radical feminist agenda, her own traveling female body is used by Beecher and her other conservative critics to limit the mobility and autonomy of white, middle-class women. Beecher’s venom reveals her investment in a construction of femininity based on conservative, middle-class values. In order to promote and sustain this gender ideology, Beecher appropriates Wright’s person and words as she seeks to consolidate the power of middle-class white womanhood. Wright’s disregard for social boundaries and expectations of “proper” feminine behavior that was first evident in her travel writing makes her a target for Beecher, and for a society threatened by women’s autonomy and mobility.

Wright spent her later life in Europe, writing England, the Civilizer (1848), a history that traces the abuse of male power and that offers in its last chapter a return to her earlier utopian writing, with an imagined world run with the participation of women: “Come! in this
last extremity let woman’s voice obtain a hearing. Woman! who never asked, nor asks for self . . . Who never felt, nor feels, saving for others and for collective human kind.” While Wright herself may have “obtain[ed] a hearing” among the American and British publics, she could not control the reception of her troubling message or her disconcertingly unfeminine presence. Simultaneously ostracized and scrutinized, Wright was held up as a “singular spectacle” of indecency, a warning that other women considering rebellion should heed. The controversial figure of Fanny Wright continued to haunt the nineteenth century even after her death in 1852.

Woman’s Rights leaders recognized the legacy of her feminism and used her picture as the frontispiece of *History of Woman Suffrage* (1881), but not before her own daughter joined in the chorus defaming Wright’s character and activism. Eckhardt describes daughter Sylva’s condemnation: “In 1874 [Sylva] testified before a Congressional committee against female suffrage. ‘As the daughter of Frances Wright, whom the Female Suffragists are pleased to consider as having opened the door to their pretensions,’ Sylva begged the Speaker and the members of the House committee ‘to shut it forever, from the strongest convictions that they can only bring misery and degradation upon the whole sex, and thereby wreck human happiness in America!’” The struggles of Frances Wright may have paved the way for later feminists, but her life and work, and even her body, were also co-opted by her adversaries, including her own daughter, and used to reassert ideologies that limited the freedom and power of all women.

Royall and Seacole each achieved notoriety as well, although on a smaller scale than Wright. Royall’s trial as a “common scold” (discussed in chapter 2) was front-page news in national newspapers, and she ensured that her name would continue to be in the news and in the shaping of news by founding and editing her own newspapers, *Paul Pry* and the *Huntress*. Largely forgotten, Royall is now being recovered as an important female pioneer in the field of journalism. Seacole gained a certain level of fame because she was featured in war correspondents’ reports on the Crimean War (the Crimean was the first war to be extensively covered by reporters stationed on the front lines of battle). *Wonderful Adventures* was intended to trade on her notoriety; the abrupt end of the war bankrupted Seacole when she could not sell the expensive cheese and champagne she had stocked for the British officers, and she wrote in an attempt to recoup her financial losses. Supportive cartoons and advertisements in *Punch*, a popular British magazine, called for
patronage of Seacole’s book and there was even a benefit held in her honor (although unfortunately it did not raise much money for her). Additionally, a favorable review of her book appeared in the *Illustrated London News* on 25 July 1857. However, the review did not acknowledge Seacole’s challenge to ideologies of race and gender in *Wonderful Adventures*, instead referring dismissively to her text as a “little book,” and concluding that it could be “safely recommended.” She remained in England during her last years, where she was received in prominent homes and by the Princess of Wales. She died in 1881, leaving a substantial inheritance. She remained in obscurity until the centenary of the Crimean War, in 1954, when the Jamaican Nurses’ Association named their headquarters Mary Seacole House. More recently, the 1980 exhibition *Roots in Britain* included Seacole in its chronicle of black British history. However, her white, middle-class counterpart Florence Nightingale (who started her now-famous corps of nurses during the Crimean War and refused Seacole’s offer to serve) clearly eclipses Seacole’s limited fame.

All three of these notorious ragged-edge travelers demonstrate that new versions of femininity—or perhaps more accurately, unfemininity—circulated widely through antebellum culture via the pages of travel narratives and the bodies of the women travelers themselves. While these authors challenged the rhetoric of peril, their reception—ranging from benign neglect to ostracism and even violence—reinforces for other women the risks involved in traveling and public life. Ultimately, all three remain flamboyant exceptions to the rule of “proper” femininity and domesticity, rather than trailblazers paving the way for more women to follow. Their unsettling mobility and autonomy may have had precisely the opposite effect, generating enough anxiety to inspire the control and commodification that characterized later women’s tourism of the nineteenth century, which was designed to combine travel and femininity rather than to test the limits of unfemininity.

The first woman to climb Pikes Peak certainly tested limits, whether they were of physical endurance, gender roles, or Woman’s Rights politics. The next chapter features Julia Archibald Holmes’s ascent of Pikes Peak in 1858 and the early feminist newspaper, the *Sibyl*, in which she published her travelogue. Wearing bloomers for her trip across the Midwest and to the summit, Holmes declares herself a radical feminist and shares her accomplishment with the reform-minded readers of the *Sibyl*. In a more-explicit way than any of the other writers in *Traveling Economies*, Holmes directly links travel and early feminism. Similarly,
the *Sibyl* uses the travel genre to support its feminist platform. Reform newspapers, and certainly radical feminist periodicals, are an unexpected and underanalyzed place to look for women’s travel writing. The final chapter of *Traveling Economies* takes us across the prairie and across the pages of the *Sibyl* to investigate how feminism works with the travel genre.