
From the Zones of Non-Being: The Lives of Nancy Gardener Prince and Mary Seacole

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Abstract

My paper builds on recent work in feminist geography and critical race theory to examine the relationship between body-geographies and travel narratives. I am interested in the ways place is negotiated as a fleshed reality, and how issues such as precarity and exposure are form-forming contexts for black women's experience in the Americas. I direct attention to two women authors whose travels polarize what Frantz Fanon and later Sylvia Wynter called the zone of non-being: their narratives reveal different junctures of exclusion from western humanism-via the map. For example, Nancy Gardner Prince, author of *The West Indies: Being a Description of the Islands* (Boston, 1841) and the 1853 *Narrative of the Life and Travels* is frequently compared to Mary Seacole and her *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Mary Seacole in Many Lands* (1857). Both women examine the transitional geographies of nineteenth-century Jamaican maroon culture, and both travel the Americas and across the Atlantic in pursuit of opportunity and release from racist enclosures. (Seacole runs the British hotel in Crimea. and Gardner Prince works for nine years in St. Petersburg, Russia.) But the stakes of their projects are very different. Seacole's rhetorical performance is designed to align her with Englishness, and separate her from Native Central Americans and her black servants. Gardner Prince's advocacy on behalf of slave women (in print, lectures, and national conventions) and her structural critique of white supremacist geography are undertaken at great personal risk. Gardner Prince's literature is centered almost exclusively on the self-as-process, and the forms of environmental exposure her body compounds in spaces extending from Massachusetts, where she suffers severe frostbite after being denied ground transportation, to coastal Louisiana, where she must fight off would-be enslavers, to St. Ann's Parish, Jamaica, where she is nearly killed in post-emancipatory riots. Her narrative places the body in relationship to movement, genre-and, importantly, the very exigencies of publishing. For both authors, race and gender are principal axes for geographical experience. In an epoch marked by emancipation, colonization, and stark racial violence, women's Atlantic narratives posit modalities for black self-definition-and the recognition that geography can be about forms that are not yet sanctioned.

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