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Review of: Black and White Women's Travel Narratives: Antebellum Explorations by Cheryl J. Fish

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Black and White Women's Travel Narratives: Antebellum Explorations*
by Cheryl J. Fish

Review by: Daphne Lamothe

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Book Review

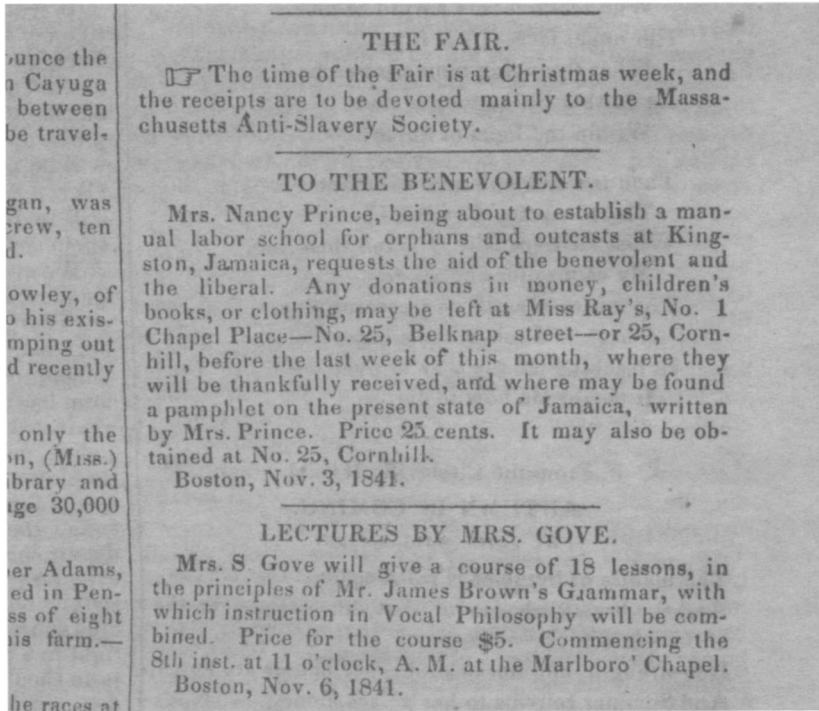
Black and White Women's Travel Narratives: Antebellum Explorations. By Cheryl J. Fish. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004. 224 pp. Library binding, \$59.95.

In *Black and White Women's Travel Narratives*, Cheryl J. Fish contributes to studies of gender, race, nation, and travel with her examination of three nineteenth-century women travelers and writers: Nancy Prince, Mary Seacole, and Margaret Fuller. By focusing on these subjects Fish sheds new light on a group of writers who, particularly in the case of the first two, have been largely neglected. Moreover, she declares her intent to “gender” Paul Gilroy’s vision of the Black Atlantic by studying the “mobile working bodies of black and white women of the Americas” and including women as “cultural agents” in discourses of travel and mobility (1993).

This notion of women’s bodies at work and in motion is central to Fish’s thesis that mobility allows for “the deployment of a critical voice within the global public sphere” (24). All three women engaged in acts of social benevolence and took part in political debates around questions of enslavement, racial uplift, and national expansion. They did so during a period of technological modernization that facilitated their movement to far-off places. Each wrote travelogues between 1840 and 1850 that were meant to function as social critiques of issues such as emigration, nationalism, slavery, and women’s rights. Their narratives document how historical conflagrations, such as the Crimean War, transformed frontier places into sites of conflict. They all found themselves at crossroads, Fish argues, in contact zones where people and ideologies collided.

Black and White Women's Travel Narratives begins with an introduction that explains in a preliminary fashion the historical and social context for these texts and that provides a rationale for reading these diverse works together. In it Fish also introduces a number of the issues, themes, and theoretical concepts that concern her, such as “mobile subjectivity,” designating the travelogue to be a “hybrid and dialogic genre” so as to decenter the

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The Liberator. (The Library Company of Philadelphia.)

narrator's authority (15), and the implications of embodiment for the female subject.

Chapter 1 focuses on Nancy Prince, a free black woman born in Massachusetts who accompanied her husband to Russia in 1824, where he worked for nine years as a guard to the tsar. After being left a widow, Prince traveled to Jamaica in 1840, where she engaged in missionary work, aiding newly emancipated Jamaicans and helping raise funds for a school for orphans. Fish describes Prince, who traveled by ship, as an anomaly, neither enslaved nor as free as the proverbial seaman. She was free to travel away from home, Fish reminds us, but her lack of race and class privilege necessitated that she justify her travel under the guise of wifely duty and moral obligation. Fish focuses most of her analysis on Prince's travel-ogues, which include an 1841 pamphlet, *The West Indies: Being a Description of the Islands, Progress of Christianity, Education and Liberty Among the Colored*



Mrs. Seacole's Hotel in the Crimea. (The Library Company of Philadelphia.)

Population Generally, and three editions (1850, 1853, and 1856) of *A Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince*. Prince's travel was motivated, among other things, by her ambivalence over the domestic roles open to her. Thus Fish envisions Prince's migrations as flights from domesticity. Fish's reading of these text centers primarily on the female subject's interrelatedness to others, be it her husband, sister, mother, or others in the communities that she gathered around her. Fish suggests that Prince's representation of her body as alternately strong and powerful or infirm and vulnerable to sickness or acts of violence resonates with the interpersonal relations and social positions she had to negotiate.

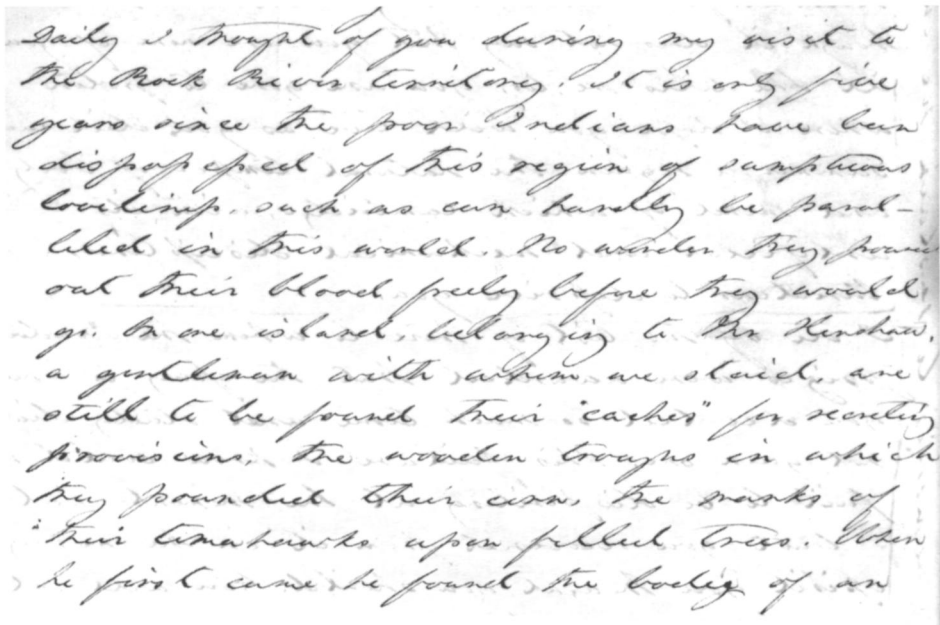
The next chapter attends to Mary Seacole, a Jamaican woman and contemporary of Florence Nightingale who traveled to the Crimea to practice medicine during the Crimean War. When faced with financial

difficulties and failing health, Seacole published *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* (1857) in order to earn a living. She was a freeborn woman of color from Kingston, Jamaica; but rather than seeing her as a black British colonial subject, Fish views her as a “transatlantic traveler of the Americas” who disrupts and resists categories of identification (66). Seacole’s identities as Fish enumerates them include her self-conception as a “yellow” woman who is between black and white, British and Jamaican identities, a Crimean heroine who defies norms of propriety, a female picaro, a nonsexual “aunty” in Panama, and “mother” at the Crimean front. Seacole’s multiplicity manifested itself in complex, and sometimes conflicting, ways. She was, for example, a supporter of the war and presumably of British militarism, and she was prone to holding herself and other “yellow” (that is, Creole) people in higher esteem than their blacker kin. Yet she also challenged white supremacy by condemning the brutality of American slaveholders who lived abroad and celebrating the success of free blacks in New Granada.

Finally, in the last chapter Fish focuses on Margaret Fuller, the most well-known writer of the three and the only white woman featured in the book. Fuller had established herself in the Transcendental circles of Emerson and Thoreau and served as editor of *The Dial* when she published *Summer on the Lakes*, in 1843, an account of her journey to the Great Lakes, then the western frontier. Fish’s analysis centers on both the original 1844 edition and the 1856 edition edited by Fuller’s brother Arthur after her death, as well as letters and journal she wrote during her travels back and forth between New England and the American West. Fish examines Fuller’s account of her westward travel into “nature” (as opposed to eastward into European “culture”), arguing that Fuller imagines the prairie to be an environment from which a mixed-race American genius would arise. This uniquely American character would borrow from European tradition while at the same time transforming the identity into an invigorating and hybrid character. Fuller imagined the frontier space to represent a transition state, a space for social change that would enable the nation to flourish as a site of freedom, and a model of racial fusion and gender equity. Fish points out that Fuller’s hybrid idealism was marred, however, by her objection to miscegenation. Fuller believed, for example, that the offspring of interracial parents inherited the inferior characteristics of each. She wrote about her belief in assimilation and eugenics, folding

notions of the purification of undesirable traits into her discourse of hybridity.

Fish's inclusion of Fuller's text in this study reveals the limits and possibilities of her approach. Fuller's engagement with frontier spaces and imperial conquest, interracial and transnational encounters, and hybridity closely resembles the experiences and themes that Prince and Seacole

A photograph of a handwritten manuscript snippet in cursive script. The text is written on aged, slightly yellowed paper. The handwriting is fluid and somewhat slanted. The text describes a visit to the Rock River territory and the displacement of Native Americans. It mentions 'caches' for provisions, wooden troughs for pounding corn, and tomahawk marks on trees. The snippet ends with 'When he first came he found the body of an'.

MS Am 1096 v. 9, n. 96. (By permission of Houghton Library, Harvard University.)

Daily I thought of you during my visit to the Rock River territory. It is only five years since the poor Indians have been dispossessed of this region of sumptuous loveli-ness, such as can hardly be paralleled in this world. No wonder they poured out their blood freely before they would go. On one island, belonging to Mr Hinshaw, a gentleman with whom we staid, are still to be found their "caches" for secreting provisions, the wooden troughs in which they pounded their corn, the marks of their tomahawks upon felled trees. When he first came he found the body of an

explored. But in other ways, Fuller's perspective is dissimilar from the others, who engage more consistently in what Fish describes as "resistant truth telling" (13). In comparison, Fuller occupied a privileged position, and she articulated a hegemonic point of view when it came to race (she was certainly more radical in her opinions on the rights of [white] womanhood). Fish implicitly gestures toward Fuller's suitability for inclusion in this study; however, by focusing on Fuller's willingness to remain conscious of how gender, race, and class influenced her point of view of American Indians, Fish renders Fuller's critical imagination complex, presumably offering enough points of intersection with Seacole's and Prince's texts. Fuller's expression of elitist and nationalist views resonates differently than Prince's and Seacole's expression of the same. Although Fish notes the differences, she does not fully address the differential relation of these nationalist and elitist expressions to one another.¹

Further, Fish must contend with the fact that, especially in comparison to these two black women writers, Fuller wrote from a position of race and class privilege. Thus where Fish describes Prince as being confined to the ship when it docks at Key West en route to New York from Jamaica, for fear of being taken into custody and enslaved, she writes about Fuller experiencing "discomfort" when traveling from the east coast to more rural settings. Associating these experiences equally to the "body in pain," even when implicit, seems dubious here.² This is not to suggest that an analysis of the interracial Atlantic/New World is inappropriate. Joseph Roach's theorization of the "circum-Atlantic" sets at least one precedent for such an approach (1996). Rather, what it demands is an articulation of the theoretical stakes and/or experiential (dis)continuities that would bind these narratives together.

Fish's central thesis is that these women's ability to travel acted as a catalyst to each coming to see herself as a citizen of the world. Arguing that each author acts out the idea that empowerment is contingent on the fact of mobility, she proposes that these texts reveal the limits and possibilities of a "mobile subjectivity." This phrase is more to Fish than a metaphor for shifting identity; her subjects literally move, and in doing so they act and speak in radical ways. Mobility (as opposed to, say, imaginative or conceptual voyages) is privileged to this extent because, Fish argues, travel is "a free passage into the liminal state, allowing one to escape the everyday self and be transformed into an(other)" (30). Fish's analysis of

each text is broad in scope, and often highly suggestive. *Black and White Women's Travel Narratives* succeeds in bringing attention to three works that merit prolonged and careful examination.

DAPHNE LAMOTHE, SMITH COLLEGE

NOTES

1. Fish describes, for example, an incident in which Prince refuses to “yield obedience” in a dispute over methods of religious pedagogy to a female class leader in a mission in St. Ann’s Harbor, Jamaica. As Fish points out, Prince’s anger is directed at a black woman rather than the white English clergyman who runs the mission, revealing Prince’s ambivalence about (black) women’s leadership in religious institutions. Yet Fish’s analysis also makes clear that the clergyman cannot remain aloof to the conflict and in fact positions the inquiring Prince as a threat to his authority (52–53).
2. Fish expands on the theoretical implications of the black female body in pain in her discussion of Nancy Prince (60–64), but in her introduction she links each author’s “embodiment” to social and political “outcomes,” drawing connections among Prince’s physical trials, Seacole’s embodiment of multiple national identities, and Fuller’s representations of the same (21–23).

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