The Victorian Age woman was subject of, as well as object to, a strict construction of womanhood to which she was expected to adhere. During the Victorian Age, women were seen as fragile, ladylike, genteel beings that were groomed from childhood to be wives and good mothers:

The woman’s power is for rule, not for battle, and her intellects are not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision ... her great function is Praise; she enters into no contest, but infallibly adjudges the crown of contest . . . All . . . knowledge should be given her as may enable her to understand, and even to aid, the work of men. (Ruskin 121, 125)

The Victorian woman was seen as the weaker vessel. Parallel with this mode of thinking, Barbara Welter in *Dimity Convictions* defines the specifications of the cult of True Womanhood:

The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society, could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, daughter, sister, wife—woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power. (21)

The woman was seen as intellectually inferior to men. She was expected to be submissive, domestic -- making a house a home as homemaker, mother, and cook -- nurturers, particularly in the role as a nurse. “Nursing the sick, particularly sick males, not only made a woman feel useful and accomplished, but increased her influence” (Welter 32). Since religion was an integral part of this construction of Victorian womanhood, “If anyone, male or female, dared to tamper with the complex of virtues which made up True Womanhood, he was damned immediately as an enemy of God, of Civilization and of the Republic” (21). Mary Jane Grant Seacole not only tampers with these virtues, she subverts them and emerges as a woman who navigates her own way through a male-dominated, female prescribed Victorian society. Further, Seacole exemplifies W.E.B. DuBois’ term double consciousness, for Seacole undermines the definition of true womanhood that Welter defines. It must be noted here, however, that Welter does not account for race in her definition. Seacole, therefore, writing under the constraints of a white [Victorian] female construction of womanhood, feels her duality -- even plurality -- both consciously and subconsciously. She must create her own space amidst this construction as both
female and black, but also as Creole with West Indian origins. Mary Seacole, therefore, becomes what Claudia Tate refers to as a “true black woman”.

In *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire*, Claudia Tate discusses domestic literature written by African American women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century [the Victorian Age]. Proscribing to the construction laid out in the definition of true womanhood by Welter, these black women, Tate says:

> Enlarged its criteria, thereby granting their heroines access to Victorian ladyhood that served to counter the racist stereotype of black female wanton sexuality. Unfortunately, these writers found themselves locked not only within color codes but within Victorian codes of literary gentility as well. To argue for social parity meant that these authors had to exalt bourgeois values and appropriate the social decorum designated for Victorian (white) ladies as the sign of their admirable character as women. Hence, to lay even tenuous claim on Victorian ladyhood as the means of asserting racial parity meant that black women writers had to follow stringent literary and social codes. (63)

Mary Seacole, clearly, finds herself locked within racial, gender, and historical codes, however, she uses these codes to redefine her space as a professional black woman in a society that tried hard to separate her due to difference(s) of race, gender, and history.

Mary Seacole, a black woman from Kingston who travels to Haiti, Cuba, England, the Isthmus of Panama, and becomes a heroine in the Crimean War, demonstrates throughout her travels her encounters with race, gender, and historical prejudice and the ways in which those intersections affect her position in society. Homi Bhabha in the *Location of Culture* focuses on these issues of race and gender and their subsequent intersection. More specifically, in “Of Mimicry and Man,” he discusses the positionality of privilege, especially in his idea of not quite/not white: “In the ambivalent world of the ‘not quite/not white,’ on the margins of metropolitan desire, the *founding objects* of the Western world become the erratic, eccentric, accidental *objects trouves* of the colonial discourse-the part-objects of presence” (92). He also discusses the space between mimicry and mockery from which his instances of “colonial imitation” are produced: “What they all share is a discursive process by which the excess or slippage produced by the *ambivalence* of mimicry (almost the same, but not quite) does not merely ‘rupture’ the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a ‘partial’ presence. By ‘partial’ I mean both ‘incomplete’ and ‘virtual’” (86). Mary Seacole’s attitude, as evidenced through her travel writing, fits into this model. She desires to be represented as a *subject* of the Western World and, therefore, an *object* of the desires of the western people, the British. Furthermore, she wishes to envelope that identity of object in order to be a part of the subject of presence. Towards these ends, Seacole practices the politics of subtle “race erasure” in order to gain respect as a nurse/doctress. In this paper, I will examine the role that Mary Seacole assumes as a Jamaican in the European culture, along with the rigidity of society toward the rights and expressions of women with a marked emphasis on the dual dilemma of Seacole as female and Black.
Mary Seacole possessed a zeal for travel even though the construction of womanhood given to her did not include or encourage this zeal. Mary Seacole was a Black woman of Jamaican descent, a Creole, as she describes herself: “I am a Creole, and have good Scotch blood coursing in my veins . . . My mother kept a boardinghouse in Kingston, and was, like very many of the Creole women, an admirable doctress . . .” (Seacole 2-3). Learning from her mother valuable information about herbal medicine, Seacole aspired to be a doctress: Although she was a “very young child [when she] was taken by an old lady;” however, “she saw so much of her [mother], and of her patients, that the ambition to become a doctress early took firm root in [her] mind” (2-3). This knowledge passed on to her by her mother was her “medical school,” and this information eventually became the cornerstone of all her remedies.

Unlike some of the prominent women of the Victorian period who desired to remain unmarried, Seacole was, in fact, married; however, her husband, Edwin Horatio Seacole, died early in their marriage after “several doctors had expressed most unfavorable opinions of his health” (Seacole 5). Although she obviously loved her husband, she completes the description of her marriage, his illness, and the mourning process in less than nineteen lines. By downplaying her marriage, Seacole disrupts the construction of true womanhood that Welter sets up. By subverting the mourning process, she undermines the constructions of Victorian ladyhood as proscribed by society. She essentially reconstructs her identity outside the parameters of [the female] gender.

Similarly, within the first seven pages of the autobiography, Seacole tells her audience about the four great losses in her life. The first was the loss of her patron whom she had lived with while she was a child; the second was her husband (previously mentioned); the third was the loss of her mother, which she describes in thirteen words. The fourth and final loss was of her house [in the great fire of 1843 which devastated Kingston], which she rebuilds. While her mother and her patron are both influential people in Seacole’s life, she fails to mention the names of these women. Both women take care of her as a child, yet she only briefly mentions their deaths. She acknowledges them as great losses, but appears to skips the mourning process. In fact, Seacole never mentions the women again in her autobiography. In a demonstration of dismissal, Seacole chooses to erase the emotional distress of these great losses in order to elevate – even – focus on her strength. Seacole appears to surmise that any focus – verbal or written – on the weak aspects of her life, may cause her to lose – literally and metaphorically – the rather tenuous status that she fights so hard to gain. Seacole, in this “erasure mode,” disrupts the construction of true womanhood by not displaying the weakness that the weaker vessel [in this instance, the Victorian woman] is supposed to display. Additionally, the loss of her house, her domestic domain, should overtly devastate the young Victorian woman, but instead she rebuilds her house and travels – an overt posture for any woman to take during the Victorian Period.

Mary Seacole’s urge to travel, experience new cultures and meet new people came rather early in her life:

As I grew into womanhood, I began to indulge that longing to travel which will never leave me while I have health and vigor. I was never weary of tracing upon an old map the route to England; and never followed with my gaze the stately ships homeward bound without longing to be in them,
and see the blue hills of Jamaica fade into the distance. At that time it seemed most improbable that these girlish wishes should be gratified; but circumstances, which I need not explain, enabled me to accompany some relatives to England while I was yet a very young woman. (4)

Instead of bringing attention to the “circumstances,” Seacole artfully subverts these, and focuses, instead, on the outwardly pleasant aspects of her travels. By choosing to focus on the positive and personally empowering aspects of her travel, Seacole skillfully constructs her travel writings as a trope of power. In one instance of her skill in this manner, she states that she is accompanied by “relatives,” which ascribes to a woman traveling unprotected and adds that her wishes are “girlish.” Here she demonstrates her willingness to adhere to the standards of the Victorian woman, but at the same time asserts her power by overcoming those preconceived notions of gender and race.

While on her first journey to visit her brother in 1850, Seacole found herself in Cruces, near Panama, with miners from California who had culturally biased views of individuals with black skin. However, when cholera broke out in this region and Seacole saved her first patient, all of the Americans as well as the natives, called upon her to treat them or their family members stricken with this deadly disease. As a result, she became known as “the yellow woman from Jamaica with the cholera medicine” (Seacole 27). Seacole adds, “The Americans in the place gladly retained me as their medical attendant, and in one way or other gave me plenty to do” (36).

Later, with the help of those who had influential contacts, Seacole practiced nursing in the Crimean War. Rejected by Florence Nightingale’s staff, even though she had recommendations, she managed to become a doctress in the Crimean War. As she “gained a reputation as a skillful nurse and doctress” (7), Seacole had the opportunity to practice medicine without a medical degree. After attending to and easing a soldier from pain without a doctor’s direction, she became respected.5

Mary Seacole, a black woman of Jamaican descent, fled to England to escape the politics surrounding her race and gender and to assume the role of a British person. Seacole appeared proud of her heritage—for example, the knowledge of herbal medicine that she learns from her mother, but, concurrently, she appears to denounce her heritage in order to be part of a society that rejects her for the color of her skin. Power is the reason for the choices in this woman’s life, yet Seacole’s case was somewhat different: her power was achieved through her talent. Her talent allowed her to circumvent the soldiers who attempted to prevent her from entering the battle lines during the Crimean War. Her medical knowledge and talent gave Seacole the ability to save others and as a result she gained a level of respect that would most likely not be accorded to a person of her gender, racial background, and cultural/geographical location.

Mary Seacole, according to Amy Robinson in “Authority and the Public Display of Identity” is situated “in the ambivalent realm which Bhabha calls the ‘not quite/not white’” (541) and that location classifies her authorizing strategies. For as Robinson puts it “although her text stages her ‘self’ as the standard-bearer of her culture, her body remains always outside the cultural parameters of a ‘real’ British subject” (541). It is, however, through Seacole’s travel writing that she attempts – and to a degree succeeds – in redefining herself as a British subject and not simply an object at their [British colonists’] disposal.
Seacole is concerned with landscape, identity, race, and gender in her travel writing. Major passages of her work provide evidence of Seacole’s introspective “eye” as she provides vivid descriptions of the landscape as evidenced in her description of what she witnesses from her ship on her way to Constantinople:

So on, past beautiful islands and shores, until we are steaming against a swift current, an adverse wind between two tower-crested promontories of rock, which they tell me stand in Europe and in Asia, and are connected with some pretty tale of love in days long gone by. (85)

For Seacole, this landscape is inhabited with intrinsic power for claiming self and space in a time period that would seek to deny both for women and for people of color. Affinity with the landscape through description and Seacole’s aesthetic possession of landscape and of [various] lands become her imperial strategy for claiming the “other” place as “home.” Effectively, affinity with the landscape becomes a strategy for Seacole in a reconstruction of her identity from Jamaican object to [implied/assumed] white British subject to self-defined black female doctress.

Seacole does, indeed, despite her wish to be subject and not object - claim her race and gender unabashedly. For example, Seacole gives a very complimentary description of Florence Nightingale whose representatives decline her job as a nurse upon first application. Since this book was written and published in order to create financial stability for Seacole, her description of Nightingale is favorable, courting the British who admired Nightingale for her accomplishments even though her ideas were radical for the time period. In the figure of Nightingale, we get clues about how it appears Seacole would like to present herself: “A slight figure, in nurses’ dress; with a pale gentle, and withal firm face, resting lightly in the palm of one white hand, while the other supports the elbow—a position which gives to her countenance a keen inquiring expression, which is rather marked” (90). While this description is overtly complementary of Nightingale, Seacole only appears to give praise to the woman [who is praised for her contributions as a nurse] even though she is overtly discriminatory in her actions toward Seacole. While Seacole provides a positive image of Nightingale initially, she inverts this positivity and calls her “impatient” (90). Seacole, who is eventually granted passage into the Crimean War without the assistance of Florence Nightingale, becomes as important in the War as Nightingale.

Notably, Mary Seacole sheds the term “Aunty” given to her by the Americans and is referred to as “Mother Seacole” by the soldiers that she treats: “Why bless my soul old fellow, if this is not our good old Mother Seacole” (Seacole 84). She refers to the soldiers as sons: “... what delight should I not experience if I could not be useful to my own ‘sons,’ suffering for a cause it was so glorious to fight and bleed for!” (Seacole 75-76). In using the title “Mother” Seacole, she “marks herself as a substitute object for the women who are absent from the lives of the soldiers she tends” (Robinson 546). Also, her use of son “reiterates the place she writes for herself; in this way she see herself as a ‘surrogate white woman’” (547), and this established her as conventional British subject.

She also establishes herself as a Victorian “lady.” Early in her text, Seacole makes an intriguing comparison when speaking of complexion: “I am only a little brown—a few shades duskier than the brunettes who you all admire so much...” (4). By describing
herself as “only a little,” Seacole sets herself up to be defined as a British white woman. The term “duskier” has a negative connotation, implying that Seacole found her complexion an obstacle in her quest for identity as a British subject. Also, she says, while still serving as a nurse in the Crimean War, “I was one of the first to ride down to the Tchernaya, and very delighted seemed the Russians to see an English woman. I wonder if they thought they all had my complexion” (Seacole 188). When Seacole sees herself in the light of a British identity, assuming that the Russians would not know that she was Jamaican, she provides further evidence that she wanted to erase the boundaries of her race with the eraser being her occupation as a nurse and a doctress.

Victorian women saw clothing as a sign of womanhood. Trousers were seen as male attire.

Seacole comments negatively on the male attire that the American women wore: They were “dressed ostentatiously in perfect male attire, with shirt-collar turned over a velvet lapelled coat, richly worked shirt-front, black hat, French unmentionables and natty, polished boots with spurs” (Seacole 41). Continually, she states, “The women alone kept aloof from each other, and well they might; for, while a very few seemed not ashamed of their sex, it was somewhat difficult to distinguish the majority from their male companions, save by their bolder and more reckless voice and manner” (18).

Seacole uses this description [of American women] to turn attention, for a time, away from her unconventional occupation as a nurse and doctress (Robinson 544) and towards her role as proper Victorian lady. She, unlike the American women, maintains a sense of femininity: “And as with that due regard to personal appearance, which I have always deemed as duty as well as a pleasure to study, I had, before leaving Navy Bay, attired myself in a delicate light blue dress, a white bonnet prettily trimmed, and an equally chaste shawl . . .”(Seacole 13). Even later in the text while in Balaclava, she maintains her ladylike appearance. While tending to sick men, Seacole states, “I had not neglected my personal appearance, and wore my favourite yellow dress, and blue bonnet, with red ribbons” (97-98). In this manner, Seacole maneuvers her way through the foreign lands, claiming her own identity through her awareness of gender issues. For Seacole, she realizes her audience, and therefore, uses her attire to present herself as a lady, thereby gaining credibility with her white audience.

Since Seacole understands the gender issue, she fights for a place in the Crimean War and as she defines herself in the role of a nurse, she displaces the European complexion as the right complexion and rewrites herself as the right woman for the job: “My first idea (and knowing that I was well fitted for the work, and would be the right woman in the right place, the reader can fancy my audacity) was to apply to the War office for the post of hospital nurse” (76). She “poses her self in contrast to almost all the women and men, white and black, she encounters in the course of her adventures, in an attempt to disable the categories which should make her peripheral or silent or poor” (Robinson 543). Through all the obstacles—lack of adequate funds, lack of notoriety, race, and gender—Seacole navigates her way through this system of privilege and places herself in a position of authority. She does so by being included in the Crimean War and through the subconscious employment of elements of the sentimental novel: “Because black novelists of the post-Reconstruction era—female and male—had to appeal to a supportive white readership out of market demand and political necessity, those writers often shaped their works in ways to court that sympathy of that readership” (Tate 103). References such as “sympathizing reader” (17,18), “kind reader” (25, 26) allow Seacole to gain the reader of
the nineteenth century – a primarily white audience. Although this emotional appeal is common in many women’s writings during this period, it is especially present in narratives written by individuals of the African Diaspora. In adopting this strategy, Seacole is able to gain the support and respect of the white publishers while telling her story, in her own way/words.

In addition to adopting strategies to appeal to a white audience, Seacole does not bother to separate herself from men, at least in a professional stance; instead, she attempts to redefine herself as a black woman who has the ability to work as a colleague with white male doctors. However, Seacole does maintain a “kind” of separatism from males by making a conscious and spoken choice not to marry again [in order to (perhaps?) gain a greater opportunity to be a British subject]:

And here I may take the opportunity of explaining that it was from a confidence in my own powers, and not at all from necessity, that I remained an unprotected female. Indeed, I do not mind confessing to my reader, in a friendly confidential way, that one of the hardest struggles of my life in Kingston was to resist the pressing candidates for the late Mr. Seacole’s shoes. (Seacole 8)

Because Seacole does not explicitly mention that she was still grieving, it is safe to assume that to marry would [only serve to weaken] her aspirations for successful professional and social positioning. As a single woman, Seacole has more power to become an individual, independent of a definition by a man—even as she, resisting her pressing candidates, clearly has the charms of a woman. This gives her power to assert her professionalism as nurse and doctress, as well as, her humanity as black, West Indian woman. An “unprotected female” is a term used by Victorians to describe single ladies. This concept suggests a connection with the terms and ideologies of the middle-class Victorians that in turn illustrates a connection to the white not black Victorian ladies. This becomes Seacole’s ultimate strategy.

As a black woman of Jamaican descent, Seacole has to navigate her way through racism. Seacole is aware of the two disadvantages that she faces in being a double minority. She details one of her experiences with racism:

In the first place, my luggage was somewhat bulky; and, in the second place, my experience of travel had not failed to teach me that Americans (even from Northern States) are always uncomfortable in the company of coloured people, and very often show this feeling in stronger ways than by sour looks and rude words. I think, if I have a little prejudice against our cousins across the Atlantic—and I do confess to little—it is not unreasonable. I have a few shades of deeper brown upon my skin which shows me related—and I am proud of the relationship—to those poor mortals whom you once held enslaved, and whose bodies America still owns. And having this bond, and knowing what slavery is; having seen with my eyes and heard with my ears proof positive enough of its horrors—let others affect to doubt them if they will—is it surprising that I should be somewhat impatient of the airs of superiority which many Americans have
endeavoured to assume over me? Mind, I am not speaking of all. I have met with some delightful exceptions. (14)

While detailing a racially motivated incident, Seacole inserts her own political views of racism and slavery. She also asserts herself as subject by questioning the authority that Americans have “assumed” over her. However, in an effort to soften the blow, she adds that not all Americans behave in this manner.

Later in the text, she describes another racially motivated incident on a steamer on her way back to Kingston. After being approached by two American ladies and surrounded by eight to nine others, the following conversation ensued: “‘Guess a nigger woman don’t go along with us in this saloon,’ said one. I never traveled with a nigger yet, and I expect I shan’t begin now,’ said another. . .”(57) The stewardess whom she asks for another place on the steamer states, “There’s nowhere but the saloon, and you can’t expect to stay with the white people, that’s clear. Flesh and blood can stand a great deal of aggravation; but not that. If the Britishers is so took up with coloured people, that’s their business; but it won’t do here” (58). By showcasing this incident, Seacole gives us a glimpse of racism and her ability to navigate through it, for after the incident Seacole exits the steamer and is picked by a male friend who happens to be a captain of a steamer. Mary Seacole with her influence is able to overcome this incident of racism.

Before leaving Cruces, Mary Seacole is honored at a dinner with a speech. After praising Seacole in the first half of the speech and referring to her as “Aunty Seacole,” the young American finished his speech with these words:

. . . Well, gentlemen, I expect there are only tu things we’re vexed for--; and the first is, that she ain’t one of us---, a citizen of the great United States---; and the other thing is, gentlemen---, that Providence made her a yaller woman. I calculate, gentlemen, you’re all as vexed as I am that she’s not wholly white---, but I du reckon on your rejoicing with me that she’s so many shades removed from being black--; and I guess, if we could bleach her by any mean we would--, and thus make her as acceptable in any company as she deserves to be---. Gentlemen, I give you Aunty Seacole!” (47)

Clearly, this American has insulted her by asking the others to “rejoice” that she is not truly black. His reference to “bleaching” her to make her white insinuates that a black person is not capable of being a good doctress, and of being in their company as an equal. For if he admits that fact, then the whole foundation of slavery would be invalid, and his whole way of life would have to be changed. However, Seacole’s keen awareness of racism allows her to respond in the following way:

Gentlemen, ---I return you my best thanks for your kindness in drinking my health. As for what I have done in Cruces, Providence evidently made me to be useful, and I can’t help it. But, I must say, that I don’t altogether appreciate your friend’s kind wishes with respect to my complexion. If it had been as dark as any nigger’s, I should have been just as happy and as useful, and as much respected by those whose respect I
value; and as to his offer of bleaching me, I should, even if it were practicable, decline it without any thanks. As to the society which the process might gain me admission into, all I can say is, that, judging from the specimens I have met with here and elsewhere, I don’t think that I shall lose much by being excluded from it. So, gentlemen, I drink to you and the general reformation of American manners. (48)

After the audience reacts in laughter, although they were not pleased with the speech, instead of anger, which she would have preferred, she admits that she is a “somewhat privileged person” (48). By admitting this position, Seacole implies that she has successfully navigated her way through her profession, for it is her profession, after all, that gives her this position of privilege. Through the American’s speech, he tries to make her an object, but Seacole, through her response makes herself subject.

Mary Seacole, the “yellow woman from Jamaica with the Cholera medicine” (27), introduced many medical personnel to herbal medicine and, importantly for the Victorian Period, the idea that a woman, a black woman, could be a nurse and a doctress. Seacole, in crossing the boundaries of her own culture through her travels and her professional career, created a place in society as a British subject in which to act and interact as a successful nurse and doctress with a Jamaican Creole heritage. Seacole possessed the will to overcome the obstacles of the time period placed on women and to triumph over them in order to make for herself, as well as similar others, a unique place in society in which women and blacks were initially outcasts. Her role in medicine allowed her to recreate herself, reinscribing (self-writing) the values of the culture in her particular way. This process of writing the feminine self creates an uneasy balance between self and culture, yet Seacole’s conflict with race and gender affirms gender and nationality in a denial of race and gender superiority. Seacole’s masterful entering into the dominant culture in her role as traveler and medical personnel becomes her unique and historical means of subverting the dominant culture’s definition of her supposed and accepted particularity of self. Seacole attempts and succeeds in escaping the boundaries of “self”, imposed by others and, in doing, placed herself firmly in the British culture – historical and literary – while rewriting the view of the Victorian woman.

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NOTES


4See p. 6. Interestingly, this information about his death comes early in autobiography.

5Mary Seacole died at the age of 52 on May 15, 1881, after the Crimean War had ended. She died a prosperous woman after publishing her autobiography, Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Mary Seacole in Many Lands.


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