

Coda

What did “moving home” really mean to the culturally diverse writers explored in the preceding chapters? The most obvious answer is that this group of formerly enslaved and freeborn men and women used their travel writing to shape complex public identities for themselves, in the context of slavery and abolition and at a moment when national belonging, though much desired, was still a dream. While the individual writers Mary Seacole, Nancy Prince, Samuel A. Crowther, Martin Delany, Robert Campbell, and Sarah Forbes Bonetta addressed related goals (including uplift, racial self-determination, Christian mission, and abolition) that tied them to a range of transatlantic Black and African communities, they were hardly united by their origin stories or their cultural histories. Indeed, the coherent selves they imagined through their writing were severely challenged in everyday life, leaving each of them still waiting, as Harriet Jacobs was in 1861, for a hearth of their own. But while “home” in the fashionable nineteenth-century sense would have meant a physical domicile, family, strict gender roles, and an imagined division between public and private, for these writers “home” had to include communities far beyond the locations that defined the proscriptions of their age.

As independent Black female entrepreneurs, Mary Seacole and Nancy Prince continued to live precarious lives. Settling in England, Seacole was “rescued” only after Queen Victoria granted her a modest stipend. After her Jamaican sojourn, Prince made her presence felt at American women’s suffrage conferences,

in letters she wrote to the *Liberator*, and in a legendary anecdote where she headed a group of angry Blacks in Boston's Smith Court to run a slave catcher out of the neighborhood. Though both women ended their respective travels and settled in specific locations, a sense of their instability and their refusal to be ignored in the larger story of colonial and community relations emerges from archival silences. In contrast, as an African American male thinker and reformer, Martin R. Delany has had a different fate: due to the careful work of countless scholars in African American studies, his place as the father of Black Nationalism has been secured and (most of) his writing recalled and revived on a regular basis. However, Delany was ever restless after he departed from Lagos. In Britain he was highly esteemed by the abolitionist crowd. By 1863 he was back in the United States recruiting Black soldiers for the Union's cause, and by 1865 he accepted the appointment to major in the 54th Massachusetts Colored Infantry Regiment. During Reconstruction he fought hard for Black equality, but his dreams of citizenship had unraveled by the time of his death in 1888, with the rise of segregation, white supremacy, anti-Black violence, and Black voter suppression.

Certainly, it is possible to make similar arguments about “home” denied to Robert Campbell, Samuel Ajayi Crowther, and Sarah Forbes Bonetta. However, as “returnees” within the larger project of African homecoming, Campbell, Crowther, and Bonetta faced an entirely different set of challenges—moving back to “familiar” ground (quite literally, in the case of Crowther) but as entirely creolized individuals, as a result of both colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade. Campbell fulfilled his dream of moving back to the ancestral homeland of his Black Jamaican mother—where, according to R. J. M. Blackett, he became a thorn in the side of British officials—while also joining forces with elite West African Christians in Lagos to assert their rights and class privilege in the face of European racism. In many ways, “home” for Campbell may well have been that community fight, even as he struggled through a number of failed businesses to keep his family financially solvent.¹ For his part, Crowther literally returned to the land of his birth, even reuniting with his mother and some of his siblings. But while he was physically “home,” he had to create “home” in the new role of a Christianized African ex-slave and later as an ordained minister. Though by the end of his life he was brushed aside by younger white leaders of the Church Missionary Society post-Henry Venn, he had contributed mightily to the growth of a native pastorate and to the same West African colonial elite with whom he had thrown in his lot.

But what of Sarah Forbes Bonetta? As a nineteenth-century African woman, Bonetta seems to be a socially precarious figure, especially in the context of the

colonial archive. Scattered as they are in a range of other people's papers, her letters and diary require a determined excavation: indeed, there is still more to discover, a task I am happy to leave to future scholars. Hitherto almost always relegated to footnotes, or recognized in an extremely qualified way by aficionados of Queen Victoria, Bonetta seems overshadowed by her apparent lack of public achievement when compared to the likes of Seacole and Prince. Though she is claimed by Afro-Britons today to refute arguments that English identity has always been white, her personal struggle with belonging was constant. To feel truly "at home" requires considerable agency and recognized control of material resources, qualities affirmed (at least in theory) by national citizenship, depending on time, place, race, and gender. Bonetta exerted agency as often as possible, but her class-based obligations to both her husband and Queen Victoria were always at odds with this agency, even as her carefully tended relations enabled her a certain freedom to order the world according to her desires. As a colonial subject, she was technically a British citizen. However, as a Victorian-era colonial wife, she had to respond to the sometimes overbearing desires of her husband, James P. L. Davies, even as he worked daily to thwart the racism of British officials in Lagos. Also ironic is that she lived among Christianized West African women merchants who, though they too were Victorian wives, still wielded a certain amount of financial power because of their skill as traders.

Stepping back, we can easily imagine the connections between Seacole, Prince, Crowther, Delany, Campbell, and Bonetta, western-educated Atlantic Africans who negotiated internecine warfare and a growing European presence. This sense of commonality might easily lead us to assume a bona fide literary tradition in early diasporic writing, despite the fracturing of this potential canon along the lines of local goals, audiences, and cultural contexts. Yet the countless modulations of class, race, color, gender, ethnicity, cultural citizenship, and community allegiance in these works generate enough differences to trouble any neat list of shared features. Engaging locations as diverse as Jamaica, Panama, Lagos, the Crimean Peninsula, rural Canada, England, and the island of Madeira, whether as published books or diaries and letters, writing by these men and women brings into clear focus the ways in which Black Atlantic subjects were at times enmeshed in the making of European empire, even as some ultimately sought to bring an idealized Black American or creolized African community independence into existence. Many were also painfully aware that the social authority that might accrue to them in one location could easily be challenged or entirely diminished in another. Additionally, what "Blackness" or "Black" skin signified in the United States and British Jamaica had an entirely

different set of meanings among the Egba, in Panama, or on the barren, wind-swept plains of the Crimean Peninsula. What has interested me throughout this project are these differences, even more than the commonalities.

Even as I have anchored *Moving Home* firmly in the nineteenth-century Atlantic world, my choice of texts underscores the ways in which Black travel exceeded the Atlantic world, as Black American and African travel has always done. For example, though Seacole and Prince were Black subjects from the Americas, the geographic range they covered (Central America, Turkey, and Russia) illuminates the need for what, in a different context, Yogita Goyal has called “new diasporas.”² Seacole’s positioning of herself with the British Army in the Crimea and Prince’s memorialization of her role as maternal landlady in Saint Petersburg force us to think beyond the reverberations of the transatlantic slave trade to include non-Atlantic, non-European empire building as well as other world populations with differing histories and regimes of race, ethnicity, gender, and economic status. Often presented as an example of early Black Atlantic literature, and more specifically as an early form of the slave narrative, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789) has always posed something of a problem for literary scholars and historians. Beyond the slave trade and abolitionist discourse, what are we to do with Equiano’s voluntary travels to the Arctic?³ As with Delany’s *Report of the Niger Valley Exploring Party*, this aspect of *The Interesting Narrative* represents Equiano’s attempt to define his creolized African identity as encompassing the same curiosity and bravery traditionally assigned to white scientists and explorers of his day. But early “science” and “exploration” were fraught categories, tied as they were to emerging discourses of empire building and race science.⁴ In such a context, what does *diasporic identity* come to mean in the nineteenth century, in the absence of communities of African descent?

In her 2015 *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, Lisa Lowe makes a cogent argument for exploring in more detail the early Atlantic World enabled by white settler colonialism, transatlantic slavery, and Chinese and Indian indenture. Lowe’s project involves rereading the well-combed archives of the East India Company and the British Colonial Office to explore the ways in which the exploitation of laborers of color in the Americas enabled the seemingly inclusive liberalism ushered in by the European Enlightenment. Lowe’s readings are greatly instructive and a valuable starting point, especially when she points out the subversive quality of social and sexual intimacies between and among colonial laborers, be they African, Indian, Chinese, or indigenous.⁵ Precisely because, as Lowe confirms, colonial officials sought to police any interactions between subject populations, I am increasingly fascinated by early African

Americans who traveled beyond the Atlantic world and in spaces where Euro-American colonial designs were present but still unasserted.

A text that immediately comes to mind is Matthew Henson's *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* (1912). In 1909, the African American Henson accompanied white American explorer Robert Peary on his Arctic expedition to find the North Pole, at the height of the early twentieth-century rush to claim the literal ends of the earth. Predictably, while Peary was celebrated as the hero of US polar exploration, Henson fell into obscurity, dying in 1955.⁶ Today, Henson's rediscovery and promotion by Black educators as a crucial example of African American contributions to science speak to one of the key goals of African American studies: to make visible the absolute centrality of Black Americans in the creation and continuance of the United States. Yet his story should also provoke a range of questions not so easily answered by the modern politics of uplift. With Henson we must once more deconstruct the category of Arctic explorer. While Equiano offers his readers only a brief glimpse of his time in the Arctic, after their 1909 expedition both Henson and Peary suggest in their respective accounts that Henson was better able to communicate with the Inuit men and women upon whom they depended for survival. Both men would go on to impregnate Inuit women.⁷

Early in *A Negro Explorer*, Henson comments, "I have been to all intents an Esquimo, with Esquimos for companions, speaking their language, dressing in the same kind of clothes, living in the same kind of dens, eating the same food, enjoying their pleasures, and frequently sharing their griefs. I have come to love these people. . . . They are my friends and they regard me as theirs."⁸ In addition, his two appendixes to *A Negro Explorer* provide both an ethnographic description of the Inuit and a list of 218 Inuit men and women who directly aided the expedition.⁹ These appendixes should give modern readers pause. On the one hand, in listing those who kept the expedition alive, Henson intentionally honors the contributions and sacrifices of the Inuit women as well as Inuit men. No doubt he fully understood that Peary and his white companions—not to mention white readers—would have looked down on these indigenous people in much the same way they looked down on Black Americans. In creating this list, Henson defied the traditional exploration narrative form as it had evolved by the first decade of the twentieth century. However, Henson's other appendix, "Notes on the Esquimos," provides racist "facts" about the Inuit that represent at best an attempt at benevolent paternalism. My point here is not to condemn Henson because he lacked a twenty-first-century sensibility. Rather, I am fascinated by the tension in Henson's account between his determination to make the Inuit visible as the backbone of Peary's entire expedition and his deployment

of scientific racism to mark his status as not only a cultural broker but also the cultural superior of those he hoped to honor. A full analysis of this tension would take the current discussion of Matthew Henson beyond hagiography by teasing out the inevitable contradictions inherent in exploration as a colonizing practice, even if that explorer is Black.¹⁰

In his recent work on African American travel writing, Gary Totten reminds us that Henson had to contend with Peary's obsessive attempts to micromanage and with virulent Jim Crow racism that followed him all the way to the Arctic, in the form of Peary's intense jealousy. Both Henson's struggles as a Black American and his awareness of his readers shaped the ways he assigned meaning to his experiences in the Arctic. In this sense, *A Negro Explorer* reverberates with the aftermath of slavery and the turn-of-the-century nadir in American race relations. However, rather than reading Henson's claim to the appellation *explorer* as exclusively a sign of his demand for equality with the white Peary, we must also think of how he negotiated the cultural and racial power dynamics that undergirded his relationship with the Inuit. In *Wonderful Adventures*, Mary Seacole rubbed shoulders with Greeks, Turks, and a range of Eastern European and Mediterranean populations, but she deliberately omitted any mention of them, since they did not serve a narrative purpose. On the other hand, since she had different practical concerns, Nancy Prince took pains to highlight aspects of Russia and the Russians that were unfamiliar to American readers, so as to cultivate her authority as a knowing traveler and lecturer in Boston. As with Prince, Henson's Black American identity was shaped in *A Negro Explorer* by the meanings he assigned to those he encountered—in his case, the Inuit—and especially to statements and silences around his sexual intimacy with at least one Inuit woman. Though the Inuit descendants of Henson and Peary hold their American ancestors in esteem today, Henson's relationship with the expedition's indigenous guides and seamstresses requires more research.¹¹

As another way of exploring the intersection of mobile Black subjects with other populations of color, let me conclude with some thoughts on a recent archive brought to light by Caribbean studies scholar Verene A. Shepherd in 2002 under the title *Maharani's Misery: Narratives of a Passage from India to the Caribbean*. Essentially a set of depositions collected in 1885 by colonial authorities in British Guyana, the first-person testimonies in *Maharani's Misery* recount the death of a young Indian woman whose name Shepherd uses in the book's title. An indentured agricultural worker bound for the Anglophone Caribbean, Maharani began her voyage from Calcutta months before the depositions were taken, on the HMS *Allenshaw*. According to the testimony of the ship's white officers, the racially mixed crew, and the indentured passengers,

one night while the ship was still in the Indian Ocean, Maharani went on deck in search of the water closet and was raped by one or more of the crew. As a result of the rape, Maharani developed peritonitis; on her deathbed, fevered and in great pain, she still managed to describe her assailants to two women passengers. According to her confidants, at least one rapist was the Black sailor Robert Ipson, who vehemently denied the charge. As Shepherd points out in her masterful introduction, since Maharani died long before the *Allenshaw* even entered the Atlantic Ocean, her voice was essentially absent from the proceedings, even as her words were relayed by the other women. As Shepherd reminds us, Maharani's confidants, as well as any number of female indentured workers, were regularly the target of sexual assault. The other depositions—all from men—were marked by competing accounts and even misdirection, depending on their rank, their race, and their places of origin. Consequently, though the crew testified to a man that the officers regularly took sexual advantage of the female workers, the officers made Robert Ipson their scapegoat. On the other hand, the few indentured male passengers who were interviewed implicated both officers and the multiracial crew as sexual predators on the ship. (For their part, members of the crew complained that it was unfair that the officers were allowed to take sexual advantage of the female passengers while common seamen were severely punished for the slightest attempt at fraternization.)

To keep the story from turning into an account of male class rivalry, Shepherd understandably takes control of the collected testimonies so as to refocus attention on the deceased Maharani. However, though not mentioned in her commentary, another male rivalry on the *Allenshaw* falls right in line with historical scholarship that represents the Black sailor as a figure of agency in the world of shipboard life. Indeed, the crew's testimonies identify the accused rapist Ipson as the leader of a multiracial mutiny in response to the captain's theft of the sailors' rations. Did the captain—who came to blows with the mutineers before the latter were thrown in the brig—condemn Ipson as the rapist, as a way of punishing him? Since the most credible account of Maharani's assault (from an indentured male passenger) describes her being seized by a group of sailors, including Ipson, and forced belowdecks to the crew's quarters, did the same white crew members who participated in the mutiny enforce the stereotype of the Black rapist by shifting all transgression onto one who had only recently championed their rights? Finally, did the other two Black sailors on the *Allenshaw* distance themselves from Ipson because they feared for their own safety among the officers and crew? These questions point to expressions of shipboard masculinity that turn on endlessly intersecting classed and raced allegiances, where the crew might at some points band together across race lines

to fight against an oppressive white captain while at other times splinter along those lines, as each man sought to protect himself. One thing is clear: regardless of their stances, both the white officers and the multiracial crew expressed a deep hatred for the indentured passengers, male and female.

As a collective document, these testimonies bridge Caribbean, imperial, migration, and especially Black Atlantic history since, if we set aside Maharani's suffering for a moment, Ipson's bravery in fighting the captain would support traditional assessments of Black sailors as the embodiment of resistance to white authority at sea. As Michael A. Schoeppner has demonstrated, before the abolition of slavery in the United States, southerners were terrified of the arrival of free Black sailors to their ports, because they inevitably carried the "contagion" of liberty that would then infect slaves with whom they came into contact. Indeed, the category of Black seamen as a symbol of freedom appears in a range of antebellum Black Atlantic texts, including Equiano's 1789 *The Interesting Narrative*. The liminal space occupied by the Black seaman was so productive that a sailor's disguise enabled Frederick Douglass to escape from slavery in 1838 and Harriet Jacobs to leave her hiding place in 1841 to arrange for her children's passage to the North. Similarly, the eponymous American-born runaway slave of Martin Delany's serialized novel *Blake: or, The Huts of America* (1859–61) gained access to Black rebels in Cuba as a result of becoming a sailor after his escape.¹² As a historical actor, Ipson appears to represent this storied Black Atlantic heroism, potentially an easily romanticized Black male diasporic subject operating at the intersection of white male power on land and at sea.

Yet, the story of the *Allenshaw* reveals myriad power struggles among white officers, multiracial crews, and male and female immigrants that must have taken place on numerous transports between the British Caribbean and Calcutta. The inclusion of Indian Ocean subjects completely reorients the plain of human experience in the Black Atlantic, requiring new questions, new tools of analysis, and archival rereading.¹³ Ipson's possible role in Maharani's rape does not negate the racist betrayal of his white comrades. Rather, his story and that of Matthew Henson challenge us to think more capaciously about the social and historical conditions under which these individuals lived, thereby accounting for all possibilities as we read the past, regardless of whether the conditions fit the outcomes we crave today. For me, Seacole, Prince, Crowther, Delany, Campbell, and Bonetta were not purely resistant heroes who always overcame. Extraordinary though they were, their feats of survival also exposed numerous prejudices, flaws, and ethnocentric misreadings. These are not problems to be downplayed; rather, they necessarily affirm the ultimate humanity of Black subjects.