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Gunning, Sandra. *Gender, Place, and Travel Writing in the Early Black Atlantic*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021. 260 pp.

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<1>In the personal preface to *Moving Home: Gender, Place, and Travel Writing in the Early Black Atlantic*, Caribbeanist critic Sandra Gunning weaves a complex set of stories about her childhood memories of ecological, post-colonial, and family life and lore. She recounts the revelation of a photograph from the 1920s with an “Uncle C”—a white man— and a bare-breasted Black woman in Africa. She writes of the photograph, “[A]s part of the family to which C had directed the image, I too consumed her through the superficialities of race and gender . . . that projection assumes a colonial-era African woman automatically dispossessed and immobile, even as her presence helped C to prove his apparent social advancement” (xiv). This attention to her own limits and positionality as a so-called “successful” immigrant to the US and as a scholar of race in the Americas animates this project for Gunning and for the reader. She asks, “Can travel be transformative for the racialized and sexualized Other?” (xiv), alongside a host of other questions that solidify Gunning’s position in the field as a senior scholar long-willing to ask hard questions about the role of Black women and sexuality in nineteenth-century Caribbean life. This question, and this book, also generously provides a counterpoint to the ways that studies of early Black Americas literature have more recently and understandably been preoccupied with questions of abolition, revolt, death, and violence.

<2>Gunning then foregrounds rather than elides — and all the while upends— the association of “travel” with privilege and “choice” (3). *Moving Home* begins with a gloss on the ways that the genre of travel writing seems an impossibility for “African diasporic subject in the age of transatlantic slavery” (3). Tracking across the Black Atlantic (including US, Caribbean, and West African authors, as well as British locales), Gunning probes both the limits of the genre and limits of critical imagination regarding the complexity of Black subjects in the nineteenth century. As she argues with clear prose, “such complications require us to think carefully not only about oversimplified notions of ‘resistance’ but also about the misleading

dichotomy the term encourages against its opposite, ‘complicity’ (4). Travel, and travel writing, are the routes and forms that, for Gunning, reveal not just the fictions of imperial and colonial modernity concerning race and enlightenment, but also the constrictions of contemporary critical modes that find it hard to assign Black subjects more than the task of “writing back” to empire, or being its dupes. She particularly negotiates the role that gender—formations of Black masculinity and femininity—play in these routes to self-expression and critical reception. Focusing on Mary Seacole, Nancy Prince, Samuel Crowther, Martin R. Delany, Robert Campbell, and finally Sarah Forbes Bonetta, Gunning establishes Black Atlantic writers of the Victorian era as re-definers of the genre of travel writing as well as early and uneasy renegotiators of the presumed routes between Black peoples in the US, Caribbean, Britain, and West Africa.

<3>Readers who have followed Gunning’s work will know her foundational 2001 essay on Mary Seacole, “Traveling with Her Mother’s Tastes.” That essay lays the groundwork for what was to become this book, and for its entirely different first chapter on Seacole. Seacole remains a difficult figure in Black studies with her profit from empire and war and her alignment with British military and royalty. Framed within chapter one as a purveyor of “West Indian Hospitality,” Gunning insists on the historical-sexual entanglements of colonization as a frame to read Seacole’s own travel and travelling method of including herself and others into unusual or unwelcome scenes for a mixed-race subject of empire. As Gunning argues “Events such as the Crimean War did not change the age-old, diametrically opposed stereotypes of lascivious Black womanhood and chaste white womanhood, but *Wonderful Adventures* demonstrates the way radical locational reframing might create unusual and unexpected moments of refiguration for women normally restricted by the social norms of their places of origin” (52). This clear description of a complicated takeaway—upending one seemingly static analytical and material category of identity tilts well-worn critical routes through nineteenth-century diaspora, colonial, and race studies—is characteristic of Gunning’s prose and her intellectual project. Gunning’s second chapter continues this work with a focus on the less spectacular but totally extraordinary narrative of Nancy Prince, an African American woman from New England who winds up living in Russia as a sailor’s wife as well as traveling on missionary trips to Jamaica. Like Seacole, her inhabitation of multiple, seemingly contradictory identity positions affords her and her readers an uneasy narrative voice—the voice of a traveling subject who “has a sense of racial commonality with the ex-slaves [in Jamaica], but that commonality is, if not fully mediated, then at least refracted through the power structures that enable mission work in the first place” (84).

<4>This balance between autonomous narrative voice, the uneven experience and expectation of diaspora “racial” belonging in the uncollapsible geographies of empire, and the public presentation of self demanded of/received by the audience for these traveling subjects is triangulated anew in the next two chapters. Here, Gunning moves to examine the lives and writing of three figures of Black Diaspora masculinity, the West African missionary Samuel Ajayi Crowther and adventurer-authors Martin R. Delany and Robert Campbell, of the US and Jamaica, respectively. In Chapter Three, Gunning marvelously maps the complex terrain of professional missionary work, its stakes in white male middle class life and livelihood, and Crowther’s “anxious” yet spectacular forays into the collective form of report as the representative of a missionary organization. Noting Crowther’s adherence to and complications of the genre in descriptions of both labor and land, Gunning argues that “While Crowther’s journals articulate significant differences in perspective under the guise of the transparent native reporter, his imagined return into Nigeria is deeply intertwined with white male anxieties about basic survival” (114). Crowther’s reconnection with Africa, then, is both performed and felt as a challenge (117) that illuminates the instability of the category of “Blackness” in the diaspora over geographies, genres, and lifespans. The fourth chapter continues this trajectory but with the perspective not of personal return, but collective racial return as it is imagined by two “pioneers” of black repatriation to Africa from the Americas, Delany and Campbell. Again covering the uneasy inhabitation of a form—this time the imperial and colonial mission—through Black Americas experience, Gunning articulates how “Delany and Campbell extended and elevated forms of Black male agency within an interracial transatlantic abolitionist context” (131) at the same time that “they imagined . . . the fate of the African” in their work (131). Inclusive of observations on colorism and uneasy affiliations with African missionaries like the Crowthers who were also “western-trained” (151), their writings and Gunning’s lively and acute accounting of their journey offers a counter-narrative and a companion to the US Civil War and the “ends” of American slavery.

<5>These accounts of the difficult collaborations and affiliations with colonial forms and Black diaspora belonging culminate in a stunning final chapter on Sarah Forbes Bonetta, Queen Victoria’s African-born goddaughter. Picking up where she left Delany and Campbell, Gunning traces the Saro—a formerly enslaved African community “rescued” by the Royal Navy from within Africa after Britain abolished the slave trade—as a rising “colonial elite” into which Bonetta, a royal ward, married in 1862. Covering Bonetta’s four documented journeys to and from Africa and Britain, Gunning weaves the gendered, classed, moral/religious, geographic, and racialized identity formations and tensions mapped in the rest of the book into the examination of the public life but unpublished, informal writing of this icon. In doing

so, Gunning charts not just a clear and startling path through a multi-modal archive of Black Victoriana but a way to speak about Blackness and “social capital” that refuses to diminish the complexity of either category—and allows for deeply gendered modes of “authorship” beyond single-authored, publicly consumed text. Documenting a life and travels “under close observation” (175), Gunning reads Bonetta and her families’ journeys—and press coverage of them—as both spectacularized and routinized flows of social capital between and amongst empire and its subjects. Gunning traces how the soft capital of feminized celebrity and social appearances operated to mediate and mitigate a life of code-switching and scrutiny. It is finally this operatic “range of experiences” that Gunning uncovers, in Bonetta’s travel stories and in this sharp and necessary book as a whole, as crucial to understanding this period of nineteenth-century diaspora history. They disrupt not just studies of empire but also studies of Blackness that remain uneasy with figures who travel outside of the affiliations and political as well as generic boundaries that studies of the period have often unconsciously enforced.