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Editing Sophia Peabody’s Cuba Journal: Travel, Recovery, and Interpretation

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Some collaborations are born out of chance encounters. For us, it happened at a recent conference of the Society for the Study of American Women Writers. Having briefly met before on the common ground of studies in nineteenth-century American literature, we said “Hello” and discovered in the space of a five-minute conversation that both of us had our eyes on the early nineteenth-century journal-account of a young New Englander’s rest cure in Cuba. The traveler who authored the journal was Sophia Amelia Peabody (1809–1871), an accomplished visual artist, writer, member of a family that was vitally involved in the intellectual and cultural life of antebellum New England, and later Nathaniel Hawthorne’s collaborator and wife. Creating an edition of her crumbling unpublished manuscript from the 1830s had begun to take shape in our respective research plans, but after discussing our individual intentions, we eventually agreed to embark on the project together. We come to Peabody’s text with complementary angles of interest: Cheryl J. Fish, in women’s travel texts of nineteenth-century America and the intersections among travel, race, and disability studies; Jana Argersinger, in “relational aesthetics,” theories of antebellum female authorship, and scholarly editing.

The Traveler, the Text

Peabody’s journal, a traveling text in more than one sense, does not sit still in an armchair by the fire. It is a text that, like its young author, goes places, traversing miles and national boundaries in the form of letter installments; circulating among familial and social circles; crossing generic lines between journal record and epistolary exchange; shuttling between language and picture as modes of expression; wandering from English into Spanish now and again; pushing at authorial models that fix the text in one central consciousness under one proprietary hand. And its peripatetic tendencies bear both on the intellectual and social contexts that interest us and on the forms an edition might take.

Here is the trajectory of Peabody’s journey—and the journey of her text. In
December 1833, the twenty-four-year-old Sophia, along with older sister Mary, sailed south to Cuba from Salem, Massachusetts, headed for a rest cure her family hoped would ease a harrowing procession of headaches and other ills that had, since childhood, often confined her to bed. She was part of a package deal: Mary engaged to work as governess and tutor for the elite Morrell family, their Cuban hosts, and part of her compensation would cover Sophia’s room and board. During an eighteen-month stay, Peabody penned—and sketched—what would grow to be a more than 800-page journal, detailing her experiences at and en route to La Recompensa, the Morrell’s slave-holding plantation at San Marcos, west-southwest of Havana. She renders, in vivid sensory detail, the novelty of a sea voyage; the constant “Babel” of that city; and, then, at La Recompensa and nearby estates: dawn rides on horseback down avenues fragrant with orange, coffee, and lime hedge; excursions into the tropical landscape that inspire sketches of plant life—convolvulus, palm, night-blooming cereus—in fine naturalistic detail and stretches of language that call out for comparison to later writings of the recognized New England Transcendentalists; agile conversation in Spanish, French, and English in the multilingual household of her hosts; the visceral responses of her body to a new environment; waltzes danced (shockingly for her mother) with a dashing young member of the local Spanish aristocracy, while, she says, the “sables . . . look[ed] on delightedly”; the “strange evolutions” (again, her words) of those African bodies in their own New Year festivities of dancing and drumming; a brick kiln worked by slaves, whom she figures as “dark nude forms . . . like spirits of evil.” All this Peabody wrote in extended letter form and sent home at intervals to her mother, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody (Sr.), who would ultimately bind the whole into the three volumes now housed in the Berg Collection of English and American Literature at the New York Public Library. Although “Letters from Cuba” appears on the title page of each volume, the family came to call the text Sophia’s Cuba Journal.

The other Elizabeth in the family, Sophia’s eldest sister (named after their mother), passed the freshly arrived letters to family, friends, and acquaintances,

1 Mary Tyler Peabody Mann (1807–1887), the second of the Peabody sisters, was an educator and reformer who would also contribute to the work and promotion of her husband, Horace Mann. Her writing and editing included letters, a cookbook, early childhood education papers, and the Life and Works of Horace Mann in three volumes. Her novel, Juanita: A Romance of Life in Cuba Fifty Years Ago (1887) is based on her experience of living on the Morrell plantation from 1833 to 1835 (with Sophia).


3 Elizabeth Palmer Peabody (1804–1894) was a strong-minded public intellectual who turned her considerable powers to such matters as education for women and children (she collaborated with
and she read passages aloud at social gatherings—without Sophia’s consent and to her heated consternation. Nathaniel Hawthorne would eventually borrow the manuscript and make use of it in some of his tales, reportedly dubbing Sophia the “Queen of Journalizers.” The text was not published in the conventional sense during the nineteenth century (Sophia would resist her masterful elder sister’s later attempts to do so), and although it did move through patterns of circulation in keeping with scribal traditions, Sophia’s reluctance to let it circulate even in manuscript form beyond her immediate family complicates such an understanding. The one contemporary iteration of the journal is an annotated scholarly transcription by Claire Badaracco, who submitted the first volume as her Ph.D. dissertation in the 1970s and completed all three volumes in typescript by 1985. Until quite recently scholarship on the journal has been limited.

Peabody in Contexts

Those attributes of Peabody’s Cuba Journal that attract us, both individually and jointly, are guiding our plans to set it in contextual and interpretive frames. First, let us situate the journal in the context of Atlantic travel literature. In Black and White Women’s Travel Narratives: Antebellum Explorations, Fish examines travel and its relation to benevolent labor for two women of the African diaspora, Nancy Prince and Mary Seacole, both of whom found through mobility and writing a way in which to enter the public sphere. They inscribed in the hybrid genre of the travel narrative their significant interventions in institutional policy and practices related to abolition, education, medicine, economy, and women’s roles—uses of the genre that differ from Peabody’s in telling ways.

Bronson Alcott on the experimental Temple School and brought kindergarten to the U.S.) and promoting artistic talents like Nathaniel Hawthorne and her own sister Sophia. The bookstore and publishing house she established in Boston served as a gathering place for Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and others. And her own Transcendentalist bearings found expression in her contributions to The Dial as both publisher and writer.


Prince, a free-born African-American from the Boston area, traveled to Russia with her husband, a guard for the Tsar, and ran her own clothing-making business in St. Petersburg; later, as a widow, she moved on to post-emancipation Jamaica and found “a field of usefulness” spread out before her. There, she attempted to observe the freed slaves and convey in her writing, transnationally, their industriousness, love of freedom, and desire for opportunity to American readers, both white and black, who knew her from Garrisonian abolitionist circles. Seacole, a Jamaican-born traveling doctor and businesswoman, used her healing and entrepreneurial skills to intervene at the colonial crossroads of Panama when it was the popular stopover for gold-rush prospectors. After running a hotel there for a time, she decamped for the Crimean War, where she was rejected as a Nightingale nurse but remained convinced of her pluck and usefulness, especially in the theatre of war.

The third traveler in Fish’s study, Margaret Fuller, had more in common with Sophia Peabody: they were both white women from prominent but struggling New England families that counted on income from their enterprising and ambitious daughters; both, moreover, suffered debilitating headaches. By the time Fuller took her first extended journey away from New England in the summer of 1843, to what was then the West (Michigan, Wisconsin, and Illinois), she had already conceived of herself as a public intellectual who contributed to Transcendentalist circles as a conversationalist, editor, and writer. Although we now recognize that the Peabody sisters—especially the eldest, Elizabeth—moved in overlapping circles with Fuller, Sophia’s case is rather different. As the youngest of the family’s three daughters, who lived under the watchful eyes of sister Elizabeth and their mother, she found herself dispatched to Cuba and under pressure to compose letters for home that would keep her mother entertained and also “advised of whereabouts and whatabouts,” as Mrs. Peabody feared Sophia’s “high state of excitement’ and her tendency to enjoy things.” As a number of scholars, including Megan Marshall and Patricia Valenti, have argued, the precedent of the seduction of both Mrs. Peabody’s mother and a younger sister by Revolutionary-era jurist and playwright Royall Tyler influenced the concern for female propriety and protection that seemed especially intense with Sophia due to her chronic headaches. Those headaches “allowed her family to legitimate restraining her, but

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8 Nancy Prince, *A Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince, Written by Herself* (Boston: Published by the author, 1850); quoted in Fish, p. 3.
not withstanding their efforts,” Valenti asserts, “Sophia remains a young woman who experiences every aspect of her life intensely.”

Disability studies, another promising theoretical frame for the Cuba Journal, emphasizes the culturally fabricated narrative of the body similar to what we understand as fictions of race and gender. The disability/ability system produces subjects by differentiating and marking bodies, as does the mobile traveler’s gaze by distinguishing self from other. How does the disability system function in the Cuba Journal for the persona of Sophia in various contexts, locations, and temporal frames? According to Rosemarie Garland-Thomas, disability nuances feminist readings by examining the power relations between givers and receivers of care. How, then, does Sophia negotiate her positionality and subjectivity as the invalid, the one who is cared for and excused temporarily from work in an exotic location? What incidents of flirtation and boundary crossing does Sophia leave out or fictionalize, transform or undercut? What role does Mary, in part the caregiver, another dynamic of the able/disabled dichotomy, perform in the text? And what is the relation between figuring disability and figuring racial otherness in Cuba?

More questions arise: How and what did Sophia Peabody see? How did she figure herself in relation to landscapes, persons, society? What kinds of performance did she embody in her letters, and how did she represent herself? Black women travelers of the antebellum era emphasized their own racial and social differences in the places through which they passed, sometimes drawing attention to their bodies, and sometimes disembodying themselves in relation to the empowered “public” voices they created, in order to question institutional practices and authorize their ability to “trespass” where most women did not venture. Prince and Seacole pointed to racial inequities and hypocrisy, even as they sometimes took the position of the superior Westerner over more “heathen” populations in the Caribbean, in Central America, or at the Crimean War front. Margaret Fuller mourned the loss of the American frontier and Native American dignity, even as she felt it inevitable. Peabody, on the other hand, expressly did “not allow [her]self to dwell upon slavery for two reasons”: “One is, it would certainly counteract the benificent [sic] influences, which I have left home and country to court, and another is, that my faith in GOD makes me sure that he makes up to every being the measure of happiness which he loses thro’ the instrumentality of others.”

The context of colonialism in Cuba and the debates about slavery in-

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habit this text as present absences. Peabody does not position herself as willfully entering any public discussions as a writer of traditional travelogues about Cuba; Rodrigo Lazo calls her stance “antirepresentational” in relation to the more typical travel writer’s gaze, and Fish would add that her vision is also not in the consciously corrective or counterhegemonic mode, in contrast to the visions of such black women travelers as Prince and Seacole.

Moving forward, then, our plan is to use theory from performance studies and disability studies to contextualize in greater depth Sophia’s negotiation of place, space, and subjectivity within her letters. Fish will apply her concept of “mobile subjectivity,” defined as shifting positionality contingent upon geographic, geopolitical, institutional and/or familial policies and practices to create various versions of the self and the writer’s voice. We see different Sophias in the Cuba Journal letters home—the recovering or languishing invalid, the (Transcendentalist) nature lover, the early-rising horsewoman and her guide, the lady of leisure in the upper-class plantation society life, and—as Argersinger, in particular, will address—the self-conscious writer with decided opinions about the disposition of her narrative.

Migrating “Author(s)”

One of this text’s tendencies to restlessness, we propose, is in the multiple, dialogic model of authorship it manifests: given that it is both a semi-private journal and a semi-public collection of letters (ultimately quite public thanks to sister Elizabeth and to some extent mother Elizabeth), the center of writing migrates, pushed and pulled between Sophia’s fierce possessiveness and a more relational, often competitive, form of authorship and circulation. These two—authorship and circulation—are closely bound together in the case of the Cuba Journal, because the text was composed, and sent out, episodically over a period of many months, affording time for reactions from home to reach the writer and make their effects, to greater and lesser degree, felt in further installments; in this respect, the journal represents a pattern not unlike serial publication in periodicals.

The pattern of authorship begins, of course, with Sophia Peabody, putative “owner” of the journal. Then comes Mary, the sister who shares Sophia’s sojourn and competes for ownership of the Cuban narrative by way of her incur-

14 Fish, p. 7.
sions into the journal itself, and whose own letters have come down to us as part of the text in an “appendix” Elizabeth Sr. added to the three volumes she bound together. In a letter dated October 31st, 1834 (see Figure 1), a paragraph of Sophia’s gives way to six lines of text emphatically cancelled out in dark, spiralled ink. After which Sophia reasserts herself:

That was some of Mary’s impudence which I did not choose to have in my journal & so I have made that <homely[?] > blot which I was very sorry to do. It has been very cool indeed today.17

Suggestively, Sophia’s sentence just before the cancellation makes reference to La Recompensa’s slaves; perhaps Mary, whose reformist ire kindled at the sight of plantation slavery, made a critical comment that Sophia did not like.

A little later, Mary inserts an aside to their mother reporting that, at the moment, Sophia is deeply and healthfully asleep. She concludes:

I hope this will not be called ‘impudence’—it is too bad that my little facetious sayings should be lost upon you — but she cannot scratch out my tongue, and when I get home I mean to say every thing I choose.18

Sophia waves this away as “a harmless parenthesis to [her] story” and lets it stand. The upper hand is hers, at least for the moment.

The next participant in the imbricated network of authorship, circulation, and editorial intervention was Elizabeth Sr., the mother, addressee and primary audience of the epistolary journal—one of the very few (familial) intimates whom Sophia apparently intended to see her letters. But Elizabeth, on the other side of the correspondence, took up multiple roles that sought both to shape the narrative of Sophia’s Cuban experience (Sophia’s assurance, “No, dear mother, we do not forget the Sabbath,” gives evidence of motherly admonishments)19 and to foster its transmission beyond the close communion of mother and daughter. Elizabeth Sr. was the text’s compiler, copyist, and perhaps first editor, producing for her bound volumes copies of a number of Sophia’s original letters now apparently lost (see Figure 2 for an example); while no evidence of silent emendation has come to light, we might test the mother’s copies against the body of related correspondence that surrounds and interacts with Sophia’s journal.

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16 Mary’s letters are cross-referenced, in an unidentified hand, with Sophia’s dated accounts.
18 Peabody, “Letters from Cuba” (MS), 3: 11.
19 Peabody, “Letters from Cuba” (MS).
Figure 1: A leaf from Sophia Peabody's Cuba Journal manuscript (vol. 3, pg. 10, dated October 31, 1834), showing an incursion by sister Mary that Sophia blacked out. By permission of the Berg Collection, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

Figure 2: A leaf from the bound Cuba Journal manuscript (vol. 2, pg. 35), apparently copied by Elizabeth Peabody Sr. from Sophia's original letter. By permission of the Berg Collection, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.
Another figure enters the pattern, this one particularly dominant: Elizabeth, the older sister who sometimes censured Sophia’s reported behavior and other times urged her on to further literary efforts for the delectation of the keen audience Elizabeth herself created by performing and circulating the letters. In 1834, the elder sister tried to engineer publication in the *American Monthly*, but the author would not countenance it. “Betty,” said Sophia, “is too bad. . . . I feel as if the nation were feeling my pulse. . . . If I were stuck up bodily upon a pole & carried about the streets I could not feel more exposed.”

State of the Manuscript and Possible Editions

At 170 years remove, the author’s purported distaste for the exposure of publication no longer at issue (at least in any simple or direct way), the time is ripe for an edition—not least because the manuscript is feeling its years. On two of the journal volumes, the binding does remain largely intact, but the third is unbound and its loose leaves, protected in Mylar sleeves, are vulnerable to shuffling. While the manuscript seems virtually complete, it is becoming increasingly fragile as scholars handle its pages in the surge of interest Sophia Peabody has begun to inspire. Fortunately, a much-needed and timely conservation effort is now underway: Patricia Dunlavy Valenti (Peabody’s current biographer) has restored proper page order in volume 3 and prepared the manuscript, along with a user’s guide, for a full digitized holograph that the New York Public Library plans to mount online in the near future. This resource will make the way substantially smoother for our project, among its other benefits to scholars.

In our role as editors and interpreters, we are mulling over how best to represent in print and/or online the multiple crosscurrents that run through and around this text. An edition that did justice to that fraught and fertile web of relation would make available, as much as possible, the correspondence and other writing that went on around it, in response to it, and that contoured the journal itself as words of reaction reached Sophia. One route, an ambitious one, would lead toward a digital presentation something like the Emily Dickinson online archive, laying out a hypertextual constellation of interconnected letters and other materials: a “relational” edition. Links to facsimile pages would be needed.


22 Other materials that might be included: According to Valenti, the University of Virginia holds an important letter identified as part of the Cuba Journal, though Peabody wrote it to Nathaniel Hawthorne in late 1838, describing, at his request, her last stretch of days in Cuba (e-mail to Jana.
to capture the interplay of picture and text, and of marginal notes and text proper in English and Spanish. Mary’s posthumously published novel *Juanita* (1887), based on her earlier Cuban experiences, might be linked in order to allow comparisons between her reactions to plantation slavery and Sophia’s.23 And bringing the text together with other travel literature of the period and other representations of disability would help users to explore the journal’s literary and social environs. Supporting our efforts in these directions, we and the Cuba Journal have been accepted as participants in a digital editing venture planned by Brown University’s Women Writers Project.

These are a few of the promising paths and tributaries that beckon. Our collaborative editorial journey is still in its early stages, but we look forward to getting Sophia Peabody’s traveling text up and running again.

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23 See Mary Tyler Peabody Mann, *Juanita: A Romance of Real Life in Cuba Fifty Years Ago* (Boston: D. Lothrop Co., 1887). According to Lazo, both Peabody sisters were reluctant to enter publicly into the Cuba and slavery debates (p. 183).