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Introduction
Mary Prince and the Slave Narrative

Nicole N. Aljoe

Mary Prince's slave narrative, *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, Related by Herself*, stands as a significant historical and cultural document that sheds light on the horrors of slavery, grounded in the power of her voice, and the imperative for social change. Part of the avalanche of print culture that accompanied the transatlantic abolitionist movement from the late eighteenth to mid nineteenth centuries, the narrative first appeared in public in February 1831 as one of a handful of first-person-as-told-to narratives about the gendered experiences of enslavement in the colonial Caribbean. Dictated by enslaved female laborer Mary Prince, transcribed by amateur writer Susannah Strickland-Moodie, and edited by writer and Anti-Slavery Society secretary Thomas Pringle, the text serves as a powerful account of one woman's experiences and triumphs over the brutality and inhumanity endured by enslaved Africans and their descendants in the British Caribbean during the early nineteenth century. The vivid descriptions and unique voice of Prince's first-person narrative was undoubtedly a contributing factor to its popularity and led to its publication in three ever-expanding editions.

One of the only other narratives to document enslaved women's experiences was that of Joanna, the Afro-Surinamese enslaved woman that British colonial mercenary John Gabriel Stedman styled as his "wife" in his memoir, *The Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796). In addition to recording his experiences as a British soldier for hire in the Dutch colony of Suriname, Stedman also described the flora and fauna of the colony, detailing in particular various relationships and networks he developed while there. One of the most intriguing aspects of the memoir is the description of his relationship with an enslaved mixed-race woman named Joanna. Though mediated and focalized through Stedman, the memoir also offered a representation of Joanna's gendered experiences of enslavement, as well as communicated the social and political complexities of colonial Caribbean slave societies.

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While he claims their relationship was a close one and he provided many vivid descriptions of their activities, including making a home together and having a son, Stedman romanticized many details about Joanna's life and their relationship, drawing heavily upon eighteenth-century rhetorics of female domesticity as well as stereotypes of exoticization in his descriptions of Joanna and other Black people. Indeed, though he describes her as anticipating his every need and is indebted to her assistance in acclimating to the colony, the memoir includes few instances of direct speech from Joanna's perspective. Although readers welcomed the opportunity to read about the experiences of an enslaved Caribbean woman, Stedman's heavy-handed romanticization reduced Joanna's story to a borderline fictionalized portrait. Consequently, mediated slave narratives were frequently construed as inherently suspect. However, the description of Joanna in Stedman's memoir offers just one example of the various kinds of mediation associated with early narratives of enslaved individuals, many of whom did not have access to English-language literacy.

Though also mediated, unlike Stedman's representation of Joanna, *The History of Mary Prince* not only represents itself as her direct and remembered speech but also offers vivid testimonies of her myriad thoughts, feelings, and statements about her experiences of transatlantic African enslavement in the British West Indian colonies of Bermuda, Grand Turk Island, and Antigua. In addition to providing details about the local cultural distinctions of enslavement on the Caribbean islands that lacked large slave-worked sugar plantations, Prince's narrative also detailed the inhuman machinery inherent in colonial slavery and articulated the complex social geographies of urban enslavement and captive labor in the Caribbean and London. Despite Strickland Moodie's transcription and Pringle's editorial interventions, the public found Prince's narrative incredibly appealing – one contemporary review praised it as "a simple unvarnished recital of the miseries and wrongs endured by a young female slave, given chiefly (with mush good taste) in her own touching words."[1] Another contributing factor to the historical popularity of the narrative was its involvement in a series of libel trials in London in 1833 and 1834, which were recorded in other print culture outlets such as *Blackwell's Magazine*.

Yet despite its initial popularity that led to the publication of three editions, after the formal end of slavery in many of the British colonies in 1838, Prince's narrative seemed to disappear. Also, the shifting of slave narrative discourse to self-written, separately published narratives of the United States made mediated narratives like Prince's seem obsolete. Though a few twentieth-century librarians and scholars – primarily African American

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and Caribbean – continued to be aware of the narrative, its republication in 1987 by Moira Ferguson, with an introduction by British historian and sociologist Ziggi Alexander, led to the narrative's new popularity and increased audiences, particularly within Gender, African diasporic, and Caribbean studies. These initial conversations of the late 1980s and early 1990s provided the foundation for more recent scholarship on the narrative that has engaged lines of rich and varied inquiry, including highlighting how the narrative offers commentary on changing notions of labor as well as issues of embodiment and ability, in addition to facilitating more inclusive definitions of sentiment and alternative conceptions of place and space in nineteenth-century Caribbean and London.[2] Even more recently, Prince's story has inspired contemporary artistic engagements such as Amanda Ednead's award-winning play "Sold" (Ednead and Kuumba Nia Collective 2019) and Joscelyn Gardner's multimedia video installation "Black Mary; or Molly, 'Princess of Wales'" (2016).

I.1 Brief Overview of Mary Prince's Life and the Context of Her Narrative

Mary Prince was born into slavery in 1788 in Brackish Pond, Devonshire Parish, Bermuda. At her birth, she was sold, along with her mother, to Captain George Darrell and "given" as a "gift" to Darrell's granddaughter, Betsey Williams. Though she describes a seemingly idyllic early childhood, this description is counterpoised to the description of her earliest experiences of enslaved labor when she was hired out as a twelve-year-old baby nurse to a Mrs. Prudden in 1800. Late that same year she, her mother, and her sisters are "sold" at auction – Prince becomes enslaved by Captain John Ingham and his wife, who paid what Prince describes in her narrative as the surprising amount of £57 Bermudian currency for her. At the Inghams, Prince introduces readers to other enslaved laborers – two young boys, Cyrus and Jack, and Hetty, an enslaved woman from the French Caribbean, whom Prince describes as "the most active woman I ever saw" (13).[3] Hetty's presence allows readers to see the cultural diversity and inter-island movements inherent in Caribbean colonial enslaving culture. In addition to documenting the general and persistent abuse that Prince and the other laborers experienced, Prince also documents the specifics of the Inghams' sadistic behavior toward Hetty, which culminated in her death. The Inghams then turned on Prince herself, incurring what would become lifelong physical injuries. Like Hetty, Prince was forced to do a tremendous amount of labor, both inside and outside the house. In addition to

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household work – cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the children – she also picked cotton and took care of the animals. The violence she suffered at the hands of the Inghams was frequent and indiscriminate: "I was licked and flogged and pinched …To strip me naked—to hang me up by my wrists and lay my flesh open with the cow-skin, was an ordinary punishment for even a slight offense" (15). Finally, Prince decided she could no longer take it, and she ran away to her mother and father, who were living nearby and enslaved by Richard Darrell, seeking their solace. Although she was forced to return, her father commented,

> Sir, I am sorry that my child should be forced to run away from her owner; but the treatment she received is enough to break her heart. The sight of her wounds has nearly broke mine.—I entreat you, for the love of God, to forgive her for running away, and that you will be a kind master to her in future. (18)

Nothing changed, of course, and Prince labored for the Inghams for five more years.

In 1802, Ingham sent Prince to Grand Turk Island, where he had sold her to Robert Darrell to work on his salt plantation. While she narrates finding a supportive community among the enslaved laborers in the salt plantation, the extremely physically taxing experience of mining salt compounded her injuries and exposed her to different horrors. She writes, "I hoped when I left Captain I—, that I should have been better off, but I found it was but going from one butcher to another" (20). In the salt plantations, which were located in low-lying ocean marshes called salt ponds, enslaved people were tasked with the back-breaking work of raking and harvesting the salt that had been dried out by the sun. This required standing for long hours in the corrosive water, which burnt their skin and caused lameness. While on Grand Turk, Prince encountered her mother, who unfortunately had been so traumatized by being in the bottom of a boat that she didn't recognize her daughter. Prince worked in the salt ponds for ten years, until 1812 when Darrell decided to retire and return to Bermuda. Again, Prince incorrectly assumes that her situation would change and that Darrell's wanton violence on Grand Turk would not be continued in the more populated and relatively urban context of Bermuda. In fact, Darrell's abusive activities not only continued but they also expanded to include physical violence against his daughter, whom Prince manages to save. Prince also records that Darrell began to include sexual assault in his repertoire of abuse, requiring her to bathe him while he was naked. It was around this time that Prince began to engage in

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small-scale entrepreneurial activities to earn her own money. In the British Caribbean colonies, enslaved laborers could often keep the money they earned on their own. Seeking to escape Darrell because he was "an indecent master" (25), in 1815 Prince arranges to transfer her enslavement to John Adams Wood, who was leaving Bermuda for Antigua. An enslaved person in the British Caribbean colonies could have their enslavement transferred to another person if they could persuade them to do so. Prince was desirous of leaving Bermuda for Antigua, not only to escape Darrell but also because Antigua, as a smaller, directly ruled crown colony with no large plantations of enslaved laborers, was thought to have a more benign context for enslavement.

While at the Woods in Antigua, Prince began to suffer greatly from her experiences in the salt ponds. In addition to rheumatism, she details that she also suffered from St. Anthony's fire and walked with a limp. Despite her infirmities, the Woods still forced her to engage in a tremendous amount of work and she was subject to extreme physical punishment. And yet Prince also continued to engage her small-scale entrepreneurial activities like taking in washing and selling yams, coffee, and other provisions to earn her own money. She had planned to use the money to enable another individual to take over her enslavement, but each time she approached Mr. Wood about the possibility of transferring ownership, she would be rebuffed. During her time with the Wood family on Antigua, Prince also describes her initial experiences with the Christian spiritual communities of enslaved people and meets laborers who were allowed to worship at a local Methodist church in 1818–19. After initially being baptized as Anglican, Prince eventually joins the Moravian community at Spring Garden, where she meets and eventually marries a free Black carpenter, Daniel James. Prince writes, "[w]hen Mr. Wood heard of my marriage, he flew into a rage" and "Mrs Wood was more vaxed about my marriage than her husband" (30). And though very upset about the marriage, the Woods did eventually allow the married couple to live in a small shack on their property.

In August or September 1828, the Woods decide to travel to London to put their two children in school – a common practice – and Prince persuades them to bring her along. Unfortunately, as was the case with her prior enslavers, the new geographic context did not translate into a lessening of Prince's burdens. Though she is by now experiencing increased physical infirmities due to the abuses she suffered in the Caribbean, the Woods continue to force Prince to engage in brutalizing hard labor. At one point Prince details that "the English washerwomen who were at work

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there, when they saw that I was so ill, had pity on me and washed [the clothes] for me" (32). Since their arrival in England, the Woods had frequently threatened to kick Prince out and abandon her alone in London if she refused to work. After two to three months of this severe harassment and unable to continue the excessive labor, Prince eventually leaves the Woods' house in London and goes to the Moravian Missionaries with the help of several of their British servants. Because the 1772 Mansfield decision had stipulated that enslaved people willingly brought to England could not be forced to return to enslavement, Prince essentially snatched the reins of her freedom.

However, because she was in England on her own and without employment, Prince eventually turned to the London Anti-Slavery Society for support. There she met Thomas Pringle and George Stephens, who took her to see a lawyer to try to secure her official manumission so she could return, a free woman, to Antigua. But they explained that "the laws of England could do nothing to make [her] free in Antigua" (35). And though they did have her recount her story so they could petition Parliament in 1829, the petition was not granted. Pringle and Stephens, along with several other acquaintances that Prince had made upon her arrival in London, were able to find her small jobs here and there, including doing washing and acting as a charwoman. She eventually worked for six months as a servant to a Mrs. Forsyth, who "had been in the West Indies and was accustomed to Blacks" (36), and then she subsequently went into service with the Pringles.

While living with the Pringles, Prince recounted the story of her experiences of enslavement again in 1830, this time for publication. Strickland Moodie (at that time she was just Strickland), a young amateur writer who was staying with the Pringles, was tasked with transcribing Prince's narrative – "from Mary's own lips," "writ[ing it] out fully, with all the narrator's repetitions and prolixities" (3) – as well as the testimony of another recent emigrant from West Indian slavery, Ashton Warner. Then Pringle explains in his preface "[a]fter it had been thus written out, I went over the whole, carefully examining her on every fact and circumstance detailed; and in all that relates to her residence in Antigua" (3). In preparing Prince's narrative for publication, Pringle further explained that it was not an official publication of the Anti-Slavery Society but rather was privately published by him so that "any profits that may arise from the sale will be exclusively appropriated to the benefit of Mary Prince herself" (4).

Prince's narrative was finally published in late January/early February 1831. It received early positive reviews in several publications, such as the

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Christian Advocate, the *Englishman's Magazine*, and the *Edinburgh Literary Journal, or, Weekly Register of Criticism and Belles Lettres*.[4] The initial publication and subsequent positive reviews of "the heart-rending narrative" drew angry responses from the British pro-slavery press,[5] in particular from James MacQueen, editor of the *Glasgow Courier*, who questioned the accuracy of *The History* as well as Prince's morality. In an 1831 article for *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, he asserted that the narrative was "anti-colonial" propaganda aimed at "destroying" the characters of the Woods and at misrepresenting the slave-owning planter class (MacQueen 744). MacQueen's attack led Pringle to bring a case of libel in 1831 against Thomas Cadell, the editor of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, for having published it. Pringle was successful, but later the same year he was taken to court and sued by John Wood, also for libel, for his publication of Prince's *History*. Prince appeared as a witness in court in both trials.

Very little is known of Mary Prince's life in London after she left the Wood family. We do know that in 1832 Strickland Moodie records that Prince attended her wedding to John Wedderburn Dunbar Moodie and later that same year in July Prince requested to be readmitted to the Moravian Church in London.[6] We also know that she appeared as a witness in both libel trials in 1833. In 1834, Prince's husband Daniel James is documented as living with another woman in Antigua.[7] After this point, it is not known whether she eventually returned to Antigua or Bermuda or whether she remained in England.

I.2 Prince's Narrative as a Slave Narrative

Depending on how they are defined, one can argue that narratives about the experiences of enslavement from the perspective of the enslaved have existed as long as the system of enslavement. Early Greek, Roman, and South Asian texts, as well as many others across the globe, include narrative descriptions of experiences of forms of enslavement. Yet to talk of the literary and historical genre understood as the slave narrative is to focus on those narratives created during the development of the transatlantic African slave system of the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries. Due to the overrepresentations of texts from the United States as the defining models of the genre, the too often assumption has been to focus on the self-written and separately published narratives such as that by Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs. However, the vast majority of narratives of the lives of the enslaved are mediated in some way, shape, or form, frequently transcribed by or included in texts written by others. Of the over

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6,000 slave narratives recorded in an early bibliography, only 250 to 300 were self-written and separately published.[8] Prince's narrative is emblematic of this majority of hybrid texts – mediated through Strickland Moodie's transcription and Pringle's editorial additions; though Prince's narrative is the center, it was altered over three editions and included commentary and corrections from several other voices.

As editor, Pringle attached footnotes, his own preface, and a supplement. The supplement contains a variety of textual materials, including a copy of the note John Wood had given Prince in London, an additional narrative about a young enslaved man, Louis Asa-Asa, and letters of authenticity from Pringle's wife and a long letter from abolitionist Joseph Phillips. Pringle also gives his own account of Prince's character and offers his own reading of the importance and significance of *The History*. Unlike Stedman's text, which constrained Joanna's story in order to tell a romantic story intended to sell more copies of his memoir, the additional texts and voices are key to articulating the veracity and understanding the complexity of Prince's narrative.

And yet, despite its mediation, Mary Prince's narrative, like most slave narratives, provides a crucially specific glimpse into the dark and degrading world of slavery. Her vivid descriptions of the physical and psychological abuse she and her fellow enslaved people endured reveal the inhumane treatment that permeated the institution of slavery. Through her narrative, readers are confronted with the stark reality of slave life, fostering empathy and understanding of the immense suffering faced by those held in bondage. This portrayal of the harsh realities of slavery became a vital tool to challenge the persistence of racial capitalism and, in the hands of Black abolitionists like Prince, fueled their fervor to dismantle the abhorrent system. Like other slave narratives, Prince's text uses the power of the word to combat racial terror. Prince speaks for herself and others in order to highlight and assert their humanity.

I.3 Mary Prince's Slave Narrative: An Analysis

Toward the end of her account, the narrative records Prince as saying that she:

> […] will say the truth to the English people who may read this history that my good friend, Miss S., is now writing down for me. I have been a slave myself—I know what slaves feel—I can tell by myself what other slaves feel, and by what they have told me. (38)

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Prince's comments – with their repeated references and emphases on speaking and voice – seem to explicitly challenge articulations of the silence and absence of enslaved voices.

Privately published by Pringle, the secretary of the British Anti-Slavery Society, rather than officially published by the society, and transcribed by Strickland Moodie, a young amateur writer living with Pringle's family, the text is grounded in Mary Prince's oral narration of her recent experiences of enslavement in the British West Indian islands of Bermuda, Antigua, and Grand Turk. She is recorded as endeavoring to "say" the "truth" about the "history" of the institution and, in so doing, offers compelling commentary on the entangled relationships between voice, power, and embodiment (38). Moreover, in naming and drawing attention to Strickland Moodie's work as the transcriber – whose labor would have otherwise gone unremarked since Pringle's editorial footnote only describes her as "a lady who happened to be at the time residing in my family as a visitor" (3) – the narrative also records Prince's seeming attention to issues of transparency, labor, and gendered community. Claiming Strickland Moodie as not just a friend but a "good friend" (38), the narrative intimately connects her to Prince by emphasizing Strickland Moodie's labor on Prince's behalf – "writing down *for me*" (38; italics mine). In the final sentences of the narrative, Prince draws links among being, knowing, feeling, and telling with her own embodiment, as well as that of the enslaved (38). And although Prince herself has not wielded the pen, she is nonetheless figured as in control of the discursive situation – "I will say" – in which she offers herself as a witness in order to provide testimony of her experiences (38). This testimony relies not only upon her speech but also on her embodiment, which is connected to the bodies of others. So, although this passage from her dictated narrative seems to manifest Prince's silence in that the text is transcribed by Strickland Moodie and edited and published by Pringle, the passage also clearly frames and claims narrative authority for Prince. This authority is grounded in her ability to voice the experiences of her enslaved body, which also represents other bodies and voices. After reading a narrative like Prince's, one wonders how we can continue to construe female enslaved women as only passive, mute victims.

Yet Prince's narrative also has its own history of "silencing" in the archive. After its initial publication in 1831, it was immediately challenged as untrue. The narrative was the catalyst for three libel trials, which were grounded in assumptions about Prince's voice – generally, and its veracity – as well as her "truth" in representing her experiences of enslavement in the British colonial Caribbean. Prior to Ferguson's analysis and modern republication

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in 1987, the narrative was dismissed because of the mediation of its dictation and further that the narrative was supposedly contaminated by the editorial apparatus of its "envelope" by white mediators. Indeed, Prince's text was often absent from most early collections of slave narratives. The narrative's early archival silences were further complicated by the question of the authorship. As an explicitly mediated text that was transcribed and edited by two different people, some scholars questioned who should be considered the "true author." For years, the narrative was listed in the archive under the name of the editor, Thomas Pringle. Thus, the text's "odd" experience here offers a vivid example of the ways in which traditional archives often seem unable or unwilling to recognize the voices of enslaved women.

I.4 Illuminating Intersectional Struggles and Abolitionism

Mary Prince's narrative also highlights the intersectional nature of oppression during the colonial enslavement eras. As a Black woman, she faced not only the horrors of slavery but also the added burden of gender and racial discrimination. Her experiences underscore the distinct challenges that enslaved women endured, such as sexual exploitation and the separation of families. By focusing on these intersecting struggles, Prince's narrative contributes to discussions about the importance of gender equality and the need for intersectional approaches in the fight for justice.

One of the most crucial contributions of Mary Prince's narrative lies in its role as a catalyst for the abolitionist movement. Her eloquent and deeply moving account garnered widespread attention and support from anti-slavery activists, politicians, and the general public. The book's impact reached far beyond the borders of the British Caribbean, resonating with audiences in Europe and the United States. As her story circulated, it galvanized the public against the slave trade and contributed to the eventual passage of the Slavery Abolition Act 1833 in the British Empire, marking a pivotal step toward the eradication of slavery.

And yet the significance of Mary Prince's slave narrative extends beyond the abolitionist movement. Her story became a foundational text for the African diaspora's fight for civil rights and social justice across the globe. Throughout history, Prince's narrative has been revisited by activists, writers, and scholars to draw inspiration and connect with the enduring struggle against racism, oppression, and inequality. Her narrative continues to resonate in contemporary times, reminding us of the importance of confronting the uncomfortable truths of the past to create a more just and equitable future.

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