

Mary Prince, Slavery, & Print Culture in the Anglophone Atlantic World 1

1 Introduction: Mary Prince and the Romantic Atlantic World

In the past two decades, *The History of Mary Prince* (1831) has attained the central place in the study of Romantic-era British literature that it richly deserves as one of a handful of first-person accounts of the experience of enslavement from this period. Its centrality is indicative of the gradual transformation of Romanticism as a field of study that arguably has been hampered by the extent to which Romantic ideology still delimits our understandings of authorship and the literary work. When, in 1983, Jerome McGann's *The Romantic Ideology* powerfully charged scholarship on Romanticism with uncritically replicating Romantic poets' representations of their works as autonomous, original, aesthetically unified acts of self-expression that transcend the world of politics, the Romantic canon still consisted of the so-called Big Six (Blake, Byron, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, and Wordsworth). With critical race studies still an emergent field, McGann did not consider that in uncritically replicating Romantic aesthetics, scholarship also unthinkingly perpetuated the canonization of elite white male poets. But it is nonetheless true that Romantic ideology, the celebration of the poet as an autonomous genius and the literary work as an original and transcendent aesthetic entity, has perhaps made Romanticism somewhat slower than the contiguous fields of eighteenth-century and Victorian literature to recognize and account for the ways that aesthetics can be not just politicized but also racialized – and can serve as an excuse for racial exclusion.

In the years since the publication of McGann's book, scholars have begun to examine Romantic literature's investments in and critiques of slavery and imperialism, including the participation of some of its major figures – Coleridge, Southey, More, and Baubault – in the efforts to abolish the slave trade and colonial slavery (e.g., Thomas, 2000; Carey, 2005; Kitson, 2007; Bohls, 2014). But the writings of enslaved peoples remain marginalized in these discussions, in part because they can be difficult to access. Since its publication in 2000 in an expensive paperback version edited by Sara Salih, *The History of Mary Prince* has been central to the ongoing transformation of a field from which Black and Indigenous perspectives are still too often missing. Prince's *History*, which recounts her life as an enslaved person in the West Indies and the events that brought her to seek assistance from the Anti-Slavery Society in London, could not be farther from Wordsworth's recollections in tranquility or Keats's negative capability. Dictated to Susanna Strickland, an obscure contributor to fashionable magazines, buttressed by paratext written by minor Scottish poet Thomas Pringle, and incorporating testimony from other abolitionists, *The History of Mary Prince* challenges Romantic ideals of authorship

as an autonomous creative act and of the literary text as an aesthetically unified entity.¹

Mary Prince, Slavery, and Print Culture in the Anglophone Atlantic World provides a new context for understanding the significance of Prince's *History* by tracing its impact on British settler colonial writing. Whereas previous scholars have emphasized the *History*'s mediation by white abolitionist writers, calling into question Prince's agency as an author and the authenticity of her narrative, this study explores the impact of the *History* on those writers, suggesting that Prince was not merely a pawn in their struggles but an author from whose work they learned and whose narrative they imitated. And whereas previous studies have portrayed Prince's *History* as a narrative from the imperial outskirts that found an audience in Britain's metropolitan literary center, this study positions it as a metropolitan publication that reverberated through the peripheries of empire. It situates *The History of Mary Prince* at the center of a network of little-known Romantic-era migrant writers, focusing primarily on the three who produced the text – Mary Prince, Thomas Pringle, and Susanna Strickland Moodie – with glances at their most vocal proslavery opponent, James MacQueen, and their literary friends and relatives. This literary network illustrates the geographic and literary interconnections between the Black Atlantic world (Gilroy, 1995), a diasporic formation created through the colonial trade in enslaved people, and an Anglophone Atlantic world created through British migration and settlement. Indeed, the settler colonial Anglophone Atlantic was not merely connected to the Black Atlantic but built upon it, as enslavement of Black and Indigenous peoples was central to British settler colonial endeavors.

The network of migrant writers that coalesced around the publication of *The History of Mary Prince* traversed the reaches of the Atlantic world: Prince was bought and sold throughout the British West Indies before accompanying her enslavers Mr. and Mrs. Wood to London; Pringle left Scotland for South Africa, returning to London six years later; Strickland Moodie settled permanently in Upper Canada, and MacQueen made his fortune as a plantation overseer in Grenada before returning to Scotland. Including Prince, an enslaved person, in the category of “migrant writers” raises questions about how far her experiences of mobility can be compared to those of settlers or sojourners in the British colonies. While Prince's movements were largely dictated by her enslavers, it is important not to overlook

¹ It is difficult to avoid confusion in referring to a writer who published under both her maiden and married names. I generally use “Strickland Moodie” to refer to Susanna, which has the advantage of distinguishing her from her husband, John Moodie, unless I am writing specifically about her life and work before her marriage, including her time working on *The History of Mary Prince*, when I refer to her simply as “Strickland.”

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the agency that she did exert when she could. Often, Prince had no say in her journeys from one household or one island to another. But she certainly had preferences about where she lived and by whom she was enslaved, and she sought to realize those preferences. She relates that while she was enslaved by Mr. D— in Bermuda, she “felt a great wish to go” to Antigua and asked Mr. D— “to let me go in Mr Wood’s service” (2000, p. 25). While this was undoubtedly a choice between two evils, it is one of several times that Prince describes exercising agency within the confines of slavery. Similarly, when she declares herself “willing to come to England” with Mr. and Mrs. Wood, she implies that she had some choice in the matter, and possibly the option not to go. As David Eltis has argued (2002), coerced and free migration form a continuum; they are not stark oppositions. A married woman, such as Strickland Moodie, whose husband decided against her wishes to emigrate to the colonies, may have felt deprived of agency, and a displaced tenant farmer who could not find work that would enable him to feed his children may have felt that emigration was his only option. But compared to enslaved peoples, colonial settlers and sojourners had unbounded agency.

In including Prince in the category of “migrant writers,” then, I do not want to efface the vast differences between her experiences of mobility and those of white settlers and sojourners. But I do want to argue that her account of her movements in *The History of Mary Prince* distinguishes it from earlier male-authored slave narratives and influenced the accounts that Strickland Moodie and Pringle would go on to write of their own migrations. Prince’s slave narrative, in short, shaped the emergent genre of the migrant narrative, an autobiographical account of migration and settlement. Like slave narratives, migrant narratives tend to be heterogeneous compilations, often written by more than one author even when the work appeared under a single name. Their multiauthored and multi-generic assemblages display a repetitiousness that worked to legitimate their representations, and their aims are pedagogical rather than aesthetic.

Ann Laura Stoler suggests the value of studying migrant writers when she observes that “research that begins with people’s movements rather than with fixed polities opens up more organic histories that are not compelled by originary narratives designed to show the ‘natural’ teleology of future nations, later republics, and future states” (2001, p. 862). Beginning with fixed parameters, whether national, temporal, or literary historical, predetermines which writers we can study and which we must ignore. Following the movements of writers who lived and worked transnationally allows us to trace literary connections that reveal the contingency of the parameters through which we organize literary study.

Migrant writers do not fit easily into the national traditions that have long structured our discipline and that are only now beginning to give way to categories such as “global Anglophone” and “world literature.” Pringle has been dubbed “the father of South African poetry” – a title Indigenous poets have rightly problematized – but his contributions to Scottish and British literary history have received much less attention.² Similarly, Susanna Strickland is virtually unknown to scholars of British Romantic literature compared to her sister Agnes Strickland, who remained in England, but under her married name, Susanna Moodie, she occupies a prominent place in the canon of early Canadian writers. Prince has been absorbed into British Romantic studies as scholars have begun to explore the centrality of slavery and abolition to the literature and culture of the period. But just as important aspects of Pringle’s and Moodie’s identities and work are lost if we understand them only as South African or Canadian, so we limit our understanding of Prince’s by reading her narrative only in relation to Black British traditions *or* in the context of Caribbean literary culture, as Carole Boyce Davies (2002), Sandra Pouchet Paquet (2002), and Merinda K. Simmons (2009) have done.

I do not mean to argue simply that we should situate migrant writers in the literary culture of their points of origin as well as their destinations. Rather, I want to suggest that national traditions are inadequate containers within which to sort and place these writers. Scholars have already recognized this inadequacy in the case of Prince’s *History* and other works by formerly enslaved people such as Olaudah Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* (1794) and Ottobah Cugoana’s *Thoughts and Sentiments* (1787). These texts are generally read as products of the formation that Paul Gilroy terms the Black Atlantic. Gilroy (1995) has shown that diasporic Black cultures from around the Atlantic basin have closer ties to each other than to the nation-states within which they are situated. He envisions “the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis” that might be used “to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective” of Black literature and culture (p. 15).

If the Black Atlantic was created as a diasporic formation through the trade in enslaved people, we might imagine an Anglophone Atlantic created through what James Belich has described as a “Settler Revolution” – a wave of British and Irish emigration spurred by the American and French Revolutions in the late eighteenth century and the Industrial Revolution in the early nineteenth (2009, p. 9). In arguing that the works of settler colonial writers are better understood within this diasporic formation than in terms of national literary traditions, I do

² On Indigenous challenges to Pringle’s paternity claim, see Pereira and Chapman, 1989, pp. xi–xvi. Angus Calder (1982) and Sarah Sharp (2019) have explored connections between Pringle’s Scottish and South African poems.

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not mean to suggest that the experiences of settlers in South Africa were the same as those of settlers in Upper Canada or Australia, or those of sojourners in Brazil or Jamaica. Rather, I argue that taking “the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis,” as Gilroy does, allows us to see commonalities in the works of these writers that we miss when we relegate them to national traditions. These commonalities are both formal – a predilection for the genre of the sketch, for instance – and ideological, including assumptions about racial and cultural difference. Situating settler colonial writers in the context of the Anglophone Atlantic, a diasporic formation that they participated in creating, enables us to see them as belonging to a shared literary tradition that transcends the nation-state.

The writers I discuss here demonstrate that the Anglophone Atlantic intersected with and to a large extent was sustained by the Black Atlantic. Voluntary migration is motivated not only by “push” factors such as war, economic insecurity, or persecution at home but also by “pull” factors – the lure of greater opportunities, resources, and rights elsewhere. And for Britons in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these possibilities abroad were often predicated on direct or mediated participation in the African slave trade and on the displacement and exploitation of Indigenous peoples. British migration throughout the Atlantic world inevitably entailed encounters with racial difference. Responses to these encounters varied greatly. There are considerable internal tensions and contradictions in Pringle’s and Strickland Moodie’s representations of racial difference, and their writing also reveals varying degrees of awareness of their own enmeshment in colonial practices that entailed the displacement and exploitation of Indigenous peoples. Some of these internal inconsistencies might be attributed to the “ad hoc” and piecemeal quality of migrant writing. But they also confirm that Romantic-era opposition to slavery was compatible with racism.

Slave narratives and migrant narratives are centripetal genres. That is, they are generally addressed from the outskirts of empire to a metropolitan reading public. Prince was aware that Pringle’s support would enable her to reach this public and decided to publish her story so “that good people in England might hear from a slave what a slave had felt and suffered” (Prince, 2000, p. 3). We have no access to an unmediated account of Prince’s experiences as an enslaved person because she and Pringle sought to render those experiences legible to a white metropolitan English readership. Pringle explains in his Preface to the *History* that Strickland recorded the narrative as it came from Prince’s “own lips,” and that he “afterwards pruned into its present shape, retaining, as far as was practicable, Mary’s exact expressions and peculiar phraseology” (p. 3). But to appeal to a white, metropolitan, and largely female readership, Prince’s

account not only had to be “pruned” and stripped of what Pringle calls “prolixities” (p. 3); details about Prince’s sexual history also needed to be omitted to protect the delicate sensibilities of Englishwomen. Her sexual abuse by Mr. D— is only hinted at, and Captain Abbot, with whom she had a seven-year relationship, is mentioned only in passing as a gentleman who “lent me some help” when Prince tried to purchase her freedom from Mr. Wood (p. 27). White women were unwilling to extend their sympathies to an enslaved woman they considered sexually impure, failing to realize that enslaved people had as little sexual autonomy as they had economic or political autonomy. As Sandra Pouchet Paquet observes, the *History* was produced “in full self-consciousness of print capitalism as a way of winning English hearts and minds in the struggle to abolish slavery” (2002, p. 38). Published just as Parliament was debating the choice between immediate and gradual emancipation of slaves in Britain’s colonies, Prince’s story offered abolitionists a valuable opportunity not only to illustrate in graphic terms the horrors of slavery but also to emphasize the cruelties of the contingent or partial freedom that enslaved persons were granted while resident in Britain.

Migrant narratives too were written for a metropolitan readership, but their claims on that readership were different and much less urgent than Prince’s. In describing unfamiliar landscapes and peoples, and in recounting the challenges and triumphs of settlement to British readers, their authors implicitly staked a claim to belong culturally to the metropolitan center, despite their geographical distance from it. If London was, in Joseph Rezek’s words, “the cultural capital of the Anglophone Atlantic,” settlers and sojourners often found themselves living at a distance even from “provincial literary centers” such as Philadelphia, New York, Edinburgh, and Dublin (2015, pp. 3, 4). Their experiences undermine a simple opposition between metropole and province, or imperial center and peripheries, reminding us that in the early nineteenth century, locations such as Cape Town, Toronto, or Kingston might be provincial compared to London but metropolitan in relation to the Baviaans River valley, the Canadian backwoods, or a Grenada plantation. British emigrants often settled in places where there was nothing that could be called print culture or a literary marketplace – no booksellers, libraries, or publishing infrastructure. In these cases, their options were to participate in developing a local literary culture or to write for a metropolitan English readership. Frequently, they did both, revising and repurposing their writing for multiple publications and audiences. The pressures of migration required writers to approach authorship pragmatically rather than as a hallowed calling, and as a result, their works are accretive and heterogeneous rather than aesthetically unified entities.

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Following the lead of Elizabeth L. Eisenstein and Roger Chartier, historians have tended to assume that print culture was centrifugal, transmitting the values and tastes of metropolitan society outward to the provinces and imperial peripheries. But the many roles print culture played in British imperial expansion require further study. Tony Ballantyne (2007) and Robert Fraser (2008) have challenged the Eurocentric perspective implicit in histories of print. Ballantyne reminds us that “in studying the history of the book in colonized societies – whether settler colonies, plantation colonies, military-garrison colonies, or zones of informal imperialism – we cannot simply transplant European models in an unproblematic manner to the colonized world” (2007, p. 351). Fraser pushes this point farther, observing that the very term “history of the book” implies a Eurocentric orientation and may be of little use in understanding the interactions between colonial and Indigenous literary cultures. Even when colonial societies tried to emulate the practices and standards of the metropolitan literary marketplace, their print cultures were, as Patrick Collier and James T. Conolly observe, “marked by local conditions, affiliations, institutions, and patterns of sociability” (2016, p. 7). The diversity of these local conditions makes it difficult, if not impossible, to provide a general account of colonial print culture or of the interactions between metropolitan and local literary marketplaces. Collier and Conolly thus endorse the value of literary historical case studies, which serve to question and revise narratives of the history of print “that otherwise tend to calcify and become hegemonic” (p. 12). The case study I present here not only offers a new context for understanding the literary impact of Mary Prince’s *History*, but also illustrates the interpenetration of metropolitan and settler colonial print culture during the Romantic era, focusing on the examples of South Africa, Upper Canada, and the British West Indies.

1.1 Biographical Details

While the ensuing sections mention biographical details in passing, this section summarizes what we know about the major figures in this study: Prince, her collaborators Pringle and Strickland Moodie, and her antagonist MacQueen. It is intended for those who are not already familiar with these writers or who may not have read *The History of Mary Prince*.

Mary Prince was born into slavery in Brackish Pond, Bermuda in 1788. With her mother and siblings, she was enslaved by Captain and Mrs. Williams, who regarded her as a “pet” for their young daughter (Prince, 2000, p. 7). From this comparatively happy beginning Prince endured a series of sales that tore her from her family and made her the property of an increasingly brutal series of

enslavers, from Captain I–’s household at Spanish Point, where she learned “to know the exact difference between the smart of the rope, the cart-whip, and the cow-skin, when applied to [her] naked body” (p. 14); to Mr. D–’s estate on Turks Island, where long days spent working in the salt ponds left her legs “full of dreadful boils, which eat down in some cases to the very bone” (p. 19); and finally to the Woods in Antigua, where she “soon fell ill of the rheumatism” and was left, almost crippled by pain, to recover alone (p. 25). In Antigua, Prince began attending the Moravian Church, and in 1826, she married fellow churchgoer Daniel James, a formerly enslaved person who had purchased his freedom. During Prince’s enslavement by the Woods, she suffered physical and psychological abuse, relating that although Mrs. Wood “was always finding fault with me, she would not part with me,” even when Prince found the means to purchase her freedom (p. 30).

Prince accompanied the Woods to England in 1828 in the hope that a change of climate might alleviate her rheumatism and under the belief that the Woods would grant her freedom there. Once in England, Prince was indeed legally free so long as she remained in the country. But because the Woods would not allow Prince to purchase her freedom, she could not return to Antigua and her husband without also returning to slavery. For several months she continued to endure the Woods’ gaslighting, as they alternately “threatened to turn [her] out” of their house and refused to sell Prince her freedom (Prince, 2000, p. 33). Constant abuse eventually drove Prince from the Woods’ household even though she “did not know where to go, or how to get [her] living” (p. 33). She initially sought help from the Moravians, whose church she had joined in Antigua, and was subsequently introduced to the Anti-Slavery Society, the members of which provided some “warm clothing and money” until Prince found work as a charwoman (p. 36). In 1829, she “went into the service of Mr and Mrs Pringle,” where she found herself “as comfortable as I can be while separated from my dear husband, and away from my own country and all old friends and connections” (p. 36).

Although Prince’s narrative ends with her employment by the Pringles, leaving her in a kind of exilic limbo, her trials continued, quite literally. The *History*, which Prince dictated to Susanna Strickland while she was visiting the Pringles, ran through three editions in 1831. It also motivated the enraged John Wood to bring a lawsuit against Pringle for damaging his reputation. When Prince took the witness stand, she acknowledged that she had lived with Captain Abbot for seven years before her marriage to Daniel James, a fact that she had mentioned to Strickland but that had been omitted from the *History*. Prince’s courtroom evidence reveals what Salih describes as the “instability” of the *History* (2000, p. xxx), the extent to which it had been shaped to appeal to its

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audience. The effects of her testimony also reveal *why* this “pruning” was necessary. Not only did Wood win his case for libel, but, after the trial, Prince disappears entirely from the historical record, as if she were no longer of interest or use to the antislavery cause once her sexual history had come to light. Prince is not mentioned in Pringle’s or Strickland Moodie’s correspondence and her *History* was not republished until 1987. Perhaps she made her way back to Antigua and her husband after the abolition of colonial slavery in 1834. More likely she died friendless and in poverty in London.

Thomas Pringle brought a good deal of experience as a writer and an opponent of slavery to *The History of Mary Prince*. Born into a farming family near the Scottish borders in 1789, Pringle sought admission as a young man to Romantic Edinburgh’s literary elite through the portals of periodicals including *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* and the *Scots Magazine*. Although he was found wanting by the Tory writers associated with *Blackwood’s*, Pringle found a patron in Walter Scott, who sponsored his emigration to the Cape of Good Hope, which had become a British possession in 1814. Emigration offered Pringle the prospect of reconciling his family’s farming heritage with his own literary endeavors. In 1812, Pringle’s father had lost the lease on the land his ancestors had farmed for more than a century, and the family’s financial difficulties were exacerbated by the economic depression that affected many tenant farmers in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars (Devine, 2011, p. 125). Pringle emigrated to the South African Cape with his wife, father, and other members of his family in 1819 as part of a government-funded scheme. They were allocated land at the eastern frontier, near the Neutral or Ceded Territory from which the British had recently driven Indigenous peoples including the Xhosa and San. By his own account, Pringle had two objects in participating in the emigration scheme: “to collect again into one social circle, and establish in rural independence, my father’s family,” and, setting aside his literary ambitions for the moment, “to obtain, through the recommendation of powerful friends, some moderate appointment, suitable to my qualifications, in the civil service of the colony” (1834, p. 119).

Two years later, a position at the South African Public Library enabled Pringle to move to Cape Town, where, with his friend John Fairbairn, he quickly established a monthly journal, a weekly newspaper, a school for the sons of English settlers, and a literary and scientific society. Pringle’s efforts to promote literary culture, and with it the kind of free critical inquiry that might challenge the colonial administration’s treatment of South African Indigenous peoples, incurred the wrath of the colony’s governor, Lord Charles Somerset, who implemented what Pringle described as “the Cape ‘Reign of Terror’” – a “frightful system of espionage” intended “to strike down every man who

should dare even to look or think disapprobation” of the colonial government (1834, pp. 323, 333). Retreating from Cape Town to the interior, Pringle wrote most of the poems that would later be published as *Ephemerides* (1828) before he raised the money needed for his return passage to London. An essay on slavery at the Cape that Pringle wrote before his departure and that was published in Thomas Campbell’s *New Monthly Magazine* in 1826 won the attention of the London Anti-Slavery Society, of which Pringle became secretary in 1828. It was during this time that Pringle met Mary Prince and Susanna Strickland. His work as editor for two antislavery journals and a literary annual, and as ghostwriter of two books about South Africa, prevented him from publishing his own long-planned *Narrative of a Residence in South Africa* until 1834. Although conceived of several years before his involvement in the publication of *The History of Mary Prince*, Pringle’s *Narrative* reveals his familiarity with the conventions of the slave narrative and suggests the impact Prince had on his work. Pringle intended to return to the Cape shortly after the publication of his *Narrative*, but died from tuberculosis only days before his planned departure (Vigne, 2012).

Susanna Strickland, Prince’s amanuensis, represented the primary readership of the *History* – white, middle-class Englishwomen. The postwar recession that sent the Pringles to South Africa ousted Susanna Strickland’s family from what John Thurston describes as “their precarious perch among the gentry,” which they had occupied only since 1808, when her father, a shipping agent, purchased Reydon Hall in Suffolk (1996, p. 13). Thomas Strickland’s death in 1818 left the six Strickland sisters unprovided for, and five of them began writing to support themselves. Susanna Strickland published her first story at the age of nineteen and soon established herself as a writer of sketches, tales, and poems for *La Belle Assemblée*, a fashionable ladies’ magazine. But her conversion from Anglicanism to Methodism when she was in her mid-twenties alienated her from her family and led her to question her vocation as a writer.

Under Pringle’s guidance, Strickland found in the antislavery movement a focus for her newfound religious zeal and reformed authorial aspirations that bolstered her claims to feminine piety and propriety. It was while she was visiting the man she described as “my dear adopted father, Mr. Pringle” that Strickland took down the narratives of Mary Prince and Ashton Warner, another enslaved person who had sought freedom in England (Ballstadt, Hopkins, and Peterman, 1985, p. 50). In Pringle’s home, Strickland also met John Wedderburn Dunbar Moodie, whom she married in 1831. The Moodie family had lost their ancestral estate on Hoy, an island in the Orkneys, and had emigrated to South Africa in 1817 in the hope of repairing their fortunes. John Moodie, owner of a flourishing farm at the Cape, had returned to Britain