MARY PRINCE, AND CONTEXTS FOR THE

HISTORY OF MARY PRINCE, A WEST INDIAN SLAVE,

RELATED BY HERSELF

DISSERTATION

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By

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* * * * *

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ABSTRACT

In 1831, the History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave. Related by Herself was published. It was not until the 1980s that scholars such as Moira Ferguson and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. initiated scholarly reclaims of both Prince and her oral autobiography. In the 1990s, A West Indian Slave is now in its second wave of academic recovery.

In this dissertation, I propose three contexts for the History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave. Related by Herself (1831) and, in the process, construct three very different Mary Princes. My methodological approach throughout this project is comparative and multi-disciplinary. All of the chapters consist of culturally-specific readings of A West Indian Slave and cross-cultural readings of selected "classic" slave narratives. For comparative purposes, I refer to other New World slave cultures. In my quest for a multiplicity of voices, I include the perspective of Frances Ann Kemble, a British actress who became at once a wife and slave mistress. Contextualization throughout is historical, cultural and literary. My theoretical framework is selected black women's intellectual thought.

The first context that I suggest is that we read Prince's oral autobiography as an incomplete record of a culturally and historically unexceptional ex-slave woman. In this context, in which Mary Prince is Everywoman, I give the ex-slave woman historically and culturally accurate options. Second, I recommend that we read A West Indian Slave as a
culturally-specific narrative "in dialogue" with other nineteenth-century female-centered narratives of the African Diaspora. At the center of this chapter are the cross-cultural themes of female resistance and language, and in this context, Mary Prince is the mightily heroic -narrator/protagonist. And third, I propose that we read Prince's dictated story as an early example of the African American autobiographical form and Prince as a significant contributor to this tradition. In this context, in which Prince is a literary historical figure, I analyze conventions and form in the narratives of Prince and Frederick Douglass. The final chapter is a retrospective gaze at these contexts and constructs. It is actually a justification for the experimental nature of this project.
Dedicated to my maternal family line:

Great-Grandmother Emily Johnson Foster,  
whose mother remains unknown and perhaps unknowable;  
  Grandmother Easter Foster Hill  
  and my mother,  
Lula Bea Hill Thompson,  
who made dresses, though she had no patterns.
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particularly Aunt Emily and Aunt Stella.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don’t know her name? Although she has claim, she is not claimed.

— Toni Morrison,
Beloved

Until the reclamation of Mary Prince and her 1831 narrative, the History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself, both Prince and her narrative were forgotten, misplaced or otherwise lost. Since its reclamation, however, scholars have acclaimed it an important text. In the introduction in The Classic Slave Narratives (1987), Henry Louis Gates, Jr. esteems Prince’s narrative as one of several defining narratives of the African American literary tradition:

The narratives of the ex-slaves are, for the literary critic, the very foundation upon which most subsequent Afro-American fictional and nonfictional narrative forms are based. This is true of Booker T. Washington’s Up from Slavery and of The Autobiography of Malcolm X as it is of Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God, Richard Wright’s Black Boy, and Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man. . . . The Afro-American literary tradition,
especially its canonical texts, rest on the framework built, by its fits and starts and for essentially polemical intentions, by these first-person narratives. (xii)

Likewise, in his introductory essay in Six Women’s Slave Narratives (1988), William L. Andrews not only claims that A West Indian Slave is “the first female slave narrative from the Americas” (xxix), but also that Prince’s voice is “the first claim in the Afro-American autobiographical tradition for the black woman’s authority as a spokesperson for all people, regardless of gender” (xxxiv). And yet, given these premises, scholarship on Prince’s contribution to the genre of African American autobiography, and Prince as a representative voice in this tradition, is almost non-existent.

Scholars also recognize A West Indian Slave as the earliest known published first-person narrative by a black1 woman to take as its topic the sexual abuse of female slaves.2 And although, in this instance, it is “the precedent” (Gates xvii) upon which Harriet Ann Jacobs later wrote her “gender-specific and . . . racially-specific” Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (Carby 59-60), scholarship on Prince’s contribution to female-centered first-person narratives by African American women is particularly scarce. Generally, A West Indian Slave is only briefly mentioned by scholars, and then only in relation to Jacob’s A Slave Girl. For example, Hazel V. Carby notes that the theme of sisterhood between “a white woman and her black female slave” was “established” in A West Indian Slave (Reconstructing Womanhood 37). Joanne M. Braxton elaborates on this theme of sisterhood and defines others that are explored further in A Slave Girl:

Not only does Mary Prince prefigure the later Incidents in its criticism of sexual liaisons forced on slave women but also in specific uses of language. Incidents and Mary Prince employ similar modes of verbal discourse. There
are clear uses of 'sass' and invective as verbal weapons. One occurs when Mary defends the young mistress from the blows of her drunken father, another when Mary rebukes the same man for submitting her to a sexual indecency. . . . Also, within the narrative strategy of Mary Prince, there seems to be a tendency, found later in Incidents, to alternate between confrontations . . . and concealment of certain details considered 'too horrible' to report. (22).

My research also suggests that even less is known about Mary Prince than about her text.3 What we do know is that she emerged publicly for a brief moment—just long enough to tell her story—before both she and her narrative were forgotten, misplaced, or otherwise lost. We know too that this particular circumstance does not make Prince unique. Rather, it foreshadows experiences that would be shared by other nineteenth- and twentieth-century African American women and the scholarly reclamation projects that would initiate a rethinking of the African American and American literary canons.

The rediscovery of Zora Neale Hurston began approximately one decade after her death when Robert E. Hemenway received the first of two grants from the National Endowment of the Humanities in 1970-71 and 1974-75 (Hemenway xix). In 1975, a Hurston seminar was held at the annual convention of the Modern Language Association (xx), and three years later, Their Eyes Were Watching God was reprinted. Originally published in 1937, this novel, for which Hurston is most widely acclaimed, had been out of print for forty-one years (Hemenway 6). According to Mary Helen Washington, the reclamation of Hurston began with the publication of Hemenway's Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography (1977) and Walker's anthology of Hurston's writings, I Love Myself When I Am Laughing . . . And
Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader (1979).*

Until the 1980s and Jean Fagan Yellin’s “detective work,” little was known about Harriet Ann Jacobs (McMillen 8). Previously, not only was authorship of Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl attributed to Lydia Maria Child but also the narrative’s legitimacy was challenged. In his “Critical Essay on Sources,” historian John W. Blassingame criticized it as “too melodramatic” to be “credible” (373). But with Yellin’s authentication of both Jacobs and her autobiography, A Slave Girl is now recognized as an important text. Hazel V. Carby distinguishes it as “the most sophisticated, sustained narrative dissection of the convention of true womanhood by a black author before emancipation” (47). Valerie Smith writes that it is an exemplary narrative that complicates the various experiences of black women (43). And by Joanne M. Braxton, A Slave Girl is esteemed as “a representative document, speaking for many lives” (19).

Finally, for “rediscovering and reprinting” Harriet E. Adams Wilson’s Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North, Showing That Slavery’s Shadows Fall Even There, by “Our Nig” in 1983, credit is given to Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Andrews, Classic African-American Novels 18). Even though Wilson’s “autobiographical novel” (Foster 83) was published in 1859, and even though black women’s writings are being rediscovered and reprinted all the time, as of the date of this writing, Gates nonetheless distinguishes Wilson as

most probably the first Afro-American to publish a novel in the United States, the fifth Afro-American to publish fiction in English (after Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Frank J. Webb, and Martin R. Delany), and along with
Maria F. dos Reis, who published a novel called *Ursula* in Brazil in 1859, one of the first two black women to publish a novel in any language. (xiii)

Still, much of Wilson’s history remains unknown.

In the 1980s, *A West Indian Slave* was rediscovered. To my knowledge, there have been four editions since the 1831 issue. In 1987, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. edited *The Classic Slave Narratives* and, as general editor of The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers, *Six Women’s Slave Narratives* in 1988. Most recently, two other editions have been published, both edited by Moira Ferguson, a chief source on Mary Prince. The first was in 1993 and the second in 1997. In each, Ferguson recovers primary documents including prefatory letters, petitions, postscripts, appendices, recorded court cases, and a newspaper article from the *Bermuda Royal Gazette*. Although currently unavailable in video, the BBC produced a six-part film series titled *A Skirt through History* in 1994; one segment features an adaptation of Prince’s autobiography. Given the fact that scholars of African American and British literatures agree that Prince’s narrative is an important work, this text is now in its second wave of recovery.

My purpose in this dissertation is to propose three ways of reading the *History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, Related by Herself*. First, I suggest that we read Prince’s narrative as an incomplete record of a culturally and historically unexceptional ex-slave woman. Second, I recommend that we read *A West Indian Slave* as a culturally-specific narrative “in dialogue” with other nineteenth-century female-centered narratives of the African Diaspora. And third, I propose that we read Prince’s narrative as an early example of the form and Prince as a significant contributor to African American literary history.
My methodological approach throughout is both comparative and multi-disciplinary. All of the chapters consist of culturally-specific readings of A West Indian Slave and cross-cultural readings of selected “classic slave narratives.” For comparative purposes, I refer to other New World slave cultures. In my quest for a multiplicity of voices, I include the perspective of Frances Ann Kemble, a British actress who became at once a wife and slave mistress. Contextualization throughout is historical, cultural, and literary. My theoretical framework is selected black women’s intellectual thought, particularly contemporary women, and most especially Alice Walker, whose thoughtful and thought-provoking essays in In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens inform this work from beginning to end.

The primary texts that comprise this dissertation are the “classics”: The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself; the History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, Related by Herself; the Narrative of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself; and Harriet Ann Jacobs’ Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. This project also draws upon oral histories of African American ex-slaves, including those collected by the Federal Writers’ Project, compiled by B. A. Botkin and Belinda Hurmence, as well as others collected and compiled by Dorothy Sterling, and Bert James Loewenberg and Ruth Bogin; and selected narratives from The Schomberg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers.

Because after having read A West Indian Slave we find that there is much that remains unknown about Prince and her lived experience, I propose that we read it as an incomplete record of Mary Prince’s life. What we do know from our reading is that Prince was a female child, that she was of African descent, and that she was poor. We know too that she worked
all the time and that she worked very hard. If she were a one-dimensional slave woman, this fragmented story of her life, from infancy to adulthood, might be sufficient. But Mary Prince was not a one-dimensional slave woman. She was a complex and complicated woman who lived and died within the context of a particular time and space. But unless we read Prince’s story as an incomplete record of her life, chances are great that we will walk away from her text not having experienced her at all, but rather, we will have read about an indistinguishable woman whose name was Mary Prince. As readers, then, our challenge becomes one of method.

For the purpose of this dissertation, I find a model in historian Melton A. McLaurin’s *Celia, a Slave* (1991). The facts of Celia’s life, briefly, are these: She was a nineteenth-century African American slave woman who was called by a first name only. Although the details of the first fourteen or fifteen years of her life remain unknown, and perhaps unknowable, by about age fourteen or fifteen, Celia was purchased by Robert Newsom and raped by him. By about age nineteen, although pregnant with a third child and the mother of two nameless, mulatto children, Celia received no support from her mistresses who, in some ways, were as powerless as she. In defense of her honor, and perhaps out of loyalty to George, the slave man that she loved, Celia murdered her master. For this crime, she was arrested, charged with murder, tried and convicted for the same. Sometime prior to December 21, 1855, the day of her execution, Celia delivered a stillborn infant.

Confronted with the fragments of Celia’s life as Newsom’s concubine, McLaurin fills in selected “gaps” by asking an essentially speculative question: What events might have led
up to that fateful day in Celia’s life when she murdered Newsom? To this question, he responds:

Assumptions are employed to fill these gaps. Such assumptions are based upon a careful examination of the record extant, of the historical backdrop against which Celia’s life played out, and of the past quarter century of scholarship on slavery. (xii)

As readers who are reading A West Indian Slave as an incomplete record of Prince’s life, we too must fill in the “gaps” by articulating an essentially speculative question: What did it mean for Prince to live the first forty-something years of her life as a slave woman in the British Caribbean? Aside from conventional responses, the answer to this question cannot be found between the covers of Prince’s narrative. Since convention does not necessarily allow for unique experiences, the curious must not only look for answers in the text but also beyond the text.

Thus, with Celia as a model, I give voice to selected silent spaces in Prince’s life in Chapter II. Appropriately, this chapter is titled “Whether Mary Prince Knew It or Not, the Life She Saved Was Her Own.” The title is an allusion to Alice Walker’s essay, “Saving the Life That Is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist’s Life.” In this chapter, I give the “disremembered and unaccounted for” (Morrison 274) ex-slave woman options that are historically and culturally accurate. I do this because, as Toni Morrison points out in her essay titled “The Site of Memory,” the interior lives of slave narrators was absent either because these narrators willfully withheld information—

In shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they were silent about many things, and they ‘forgot’ many
other things. There was a careful selection of the instances that they would record and a careful rendering of those that they chose to describe. (110)

—or because what “the slaves themselves told” was deliberately excised “from the records” (111). I find support for my “assumptions” in contemporary scholarship on New World slave cultures. The collective voice of Alice Walker\textsuperscript{11} and the highly personalized voice of Barbara Christian\textsuperscript{12} frame this chapter.

I propose also that we read \textit{A West Indian Slave} as a culturally-specific narrative “in dialogue” with other nineteenth-century female-centered narratives of the African Diaspora. Reading Prince’s narrative as a text “in dialogue” with \textit{Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl} is a theory originally articulated by Gates (1987), Carby (1987) and Braxton (1989). In this dissertation, I want to more fully develop this idea for two reasons. First, because \textit{A West Indian Slave} allows for an examination of New World slave experiences which were shared by Mary Prince and Harriet Jacobs. This is not to suggest sameness, or that the experiences were “common” (Bush 33), or that slavery in the Americas was a “singular” experience (Conniff and Davis vii). For example, throughout the Americas, a child inherited his/her slave status from the mother, regardless of the father’s (Bush 346, 357; Higginbotham 43). Thus, this pattern may be defined as both culturally-specific and cross-cultural. Likewise, the outcomes of this pattern were both culturally-specific and cross-cultural: The child slave grew into slave adulthood and typically died, still a slave.

As for manumission, slave masters in the British Caribbean and southern United States, e.g., North Carolina, were taxed for manumission (Bush 352; Franklin, \textit{Free Negro} 21). Hence, taxation on manumission was both a culturally-specific and cross-cultural
pattern. So too were the outcomes: Enslaved British West Indian and African American men and women could expect to live out their lives as slaves. Across cultures, however, manumission was handled differently. Thus, difference is the second reason that I propose reading *A West Indian Slave* as a narrative “in dialogue” with *A Slave Girl*. For instance, before “written permission” was required in the Spanish West Indies, mulatto children and their mothers could be free on condition that the mother and father marry (Bush 357). In other words, interracial relationships + bi-racial children + marriage (could possibly) = freedom. The most likely outcome is that slave women in the Spanish West Indies perhaps willingly submitted to their masters. (Table 1 illustrates some of the culturally-specific and cross-cultural patterns in the Spanish, French, and British West Indies, as well as the southern United States.)

Regarding Mary Prince and Harriet Jacobs, we know that ethnically they were quite different: Mary Prince was Afro-Caribbean, and Harriet Jacobs was African American. There were geographical differences as well. Prince was born in Bermuda and for a time lived and worked on Turks Island, Antigua, and England; Jacobs, on the other hand, was born in the North Carolina and, until her escape, lived out her experience in this same part of the world. Moreover, aside from cultural differences (e.g., food, clothing, courtship rituals, child rearing, music, etc.), Prince’s experience included contact with other ethnically different slaves, including island-born and African-born slaves, mulattos and free blacks. Jacobs’ experience, based on what she tells us, was limited to African American slaves and mulattos, as well as free blacks. Also there were differences in their material lives (i.e., their homes, possessions, etc.). Clearly there were differences, and it is this fact that brings me to an essential question
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<th>Slave Codes British West Indies</th>
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<td>Slaves perceived as</td>
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<td>chattel; could not testify for/against whites; denied religious instruction; owners “compensated” when slaves were convicted of crimes.</td>
<td>chattel; testimony admitted only against blacks; they could not own property, except with the master’s permission.</td>
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<td>Laws enacted for the purpose of protection slaves from mistreatment by masters</td>
<td>policing slaves: slaves had to carry passes; they could not own weapons and could not congregate; certain trades were off limits to them; they could neither strike their masters nor mistresses; and they were punished for running away.</td>
<td>policing slaves: slaves had to carry passes; they could not possess weapons nor could they congregate; they could not beat drums or blow horns; and they were punished for running away.</td>
<td>policing slaves: slaves had to carry passes; permission was required to carry weapons; they could not congregate; they could not hire themselves out without permission; they could not strike their masters or any white person; and were punished for running away.</td>
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<td>Manumission</td>
<td>mulattos could be purchased by their fathers and then freed; and slaves could purchase their freedom.</td>
<td>mulatto children and their mothers could be free on condition that the mother and father marry; eventually “written permission” had to be secured before any slave could be manumitted.</td>
<td>slave owners were taxed for manumitting slaves</td>
<td>slave owners taxed for manumission: reward for “public service” (e.g., “revealing a slave conspiracy”) and by bequest in a will; manumitted slaves had to relocate within six months; slaves could purchase their freedom.</td>
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Table 1.1 Culturally-specific and cross-cultural patterns of governance in New World slave cultures.
and certainly one that drives this work: How should difference(s) be read in the lives of slave women of African descent in the New World, particularly Mary Prince and Harriet Jacobs?

In 1974 Winthrop D. Jordan’s response to such a question was that difference makes little if any difference in the lives of any slave in the New World; that English slave owners were not that much different no matter where in the Americas they settled; and that the experience of slavery was not that much different regardless of where in the Americas it was acted out (36-37). Although today it is generally accepted that positions such as Jordan’s do not allow for difference, as early as 1960, Elsa V. Goveia argued for comparative studies of slave cultures, particularly with regard to the governance of slaves. Based on her research, it is clear that there were culturally-specific governing patterns and outcomes, and that there were cross-cultural governing patterns and outcomes. With regard to women, Barbara Bush points out that “knowledge of the slave laws . . . is highly relevant to understanding the woman slave, not only as a worker but also as rebel” (6).

Knowledge of the culture is certainly relevant to understanding both Prince and Jacobs as culturally-different women who not only shared New World slave experiences but also resisted New World enslavement. At the center of Chapter III, titled “In Mary Prince’s Own Words: ‘I Then Took Courage and Said. . . . ,’” are the cross-cultural themes of language and female resistance. The chapter’s title is taken from Prince’s narrative and is the first time that Prince empowers herself with language and simultaneously asserts her humanity. By way of epigraph, I locate Prince within a tradition of female protagonists in writings by black women who likewise empower themselves with language.
Finally, I propose that we read *A West Indian Slave* as an early example of the form and Prince as a significant contributor to African American literary history. Although in recent years the African American autobiographical tradition has undergone revision—which is to say, the inclusion of women—culturally and historically, male-centeredness not only defined African American literary history but also the experiences of African Americans under slavery. Erlene Stetson addresses this very point in an essay which offers a rationale for a course that she designed and taught on female slavery in the United States.\textsuperscript{15}

Black women’s history has been neglected in every epoch, but especially under slavery. . . . scholars treat the slavery experience as a Black male phenomenon, regarding Black women as biological functionaries whose destines are rendered ephemeral—to lay their eggs and die. (61-62)

In *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life*, Bert James Loewenberg and Ruth Bogin speak to this same issue:

Not only do black women seldom appear in treatments of black history, but historians have been content to permit the male to represent the female in almost every significant category. Thus it is the male who is the representative abolitionist, fugitive slave, or political activist. The black male is the leader, the entrepreneur, the politician, the man of thought. . . . Women are conspicuous by their silence. (4)

Culture and history also silenced women in England. It was Olaudah Equiano who became the “representative abolitionist” (Edwards, *Equiano’s Travels* viii), not Mary Prince.

Such non-representation of women, according to Mary Helen Washington, has also been a fact of African American literary history. In *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women, 1860-1960*, she argues that such a tradition that denies the universality of black women’s experiences suggests that black women should be treated as stepdaughters who
prefigure and direct readers and critics “to the real heirs (like Ellison and Wright) but . . . do not influence and determine the direction and shape of the literary canon” (xix). As a solution to this problem, Washington argues that “we will have to learn to read the Afro-American literary tradition in new ways,” with “black women as artists, as intellectuals, as symbol makers” (39).

There can be little doubt that since the publication of Invented Lives in 1987, the African American literary tradition has undergone significant revision. The most recent Norton Anthology of African American Literature (1997), with Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay as general editors, is a testament to this fact. Except that it excludes Mary Prince, the Norton Anthology is perhaps the most inclusive anthology of black men and women writers in the African American literary tradition.16 One might argue that Prince was omitted because she was not an American slave, but neither was Olaudah Equino. In To Tell a Free Story, William L. Andrews writes that although Equiano’s autobiography is claimed by African American literary scholars, Equiano was a British citizen, not an American slave. He argues this point even though Equiano experienced slavery in Massachusetts and Virginia for a brief time and witnessed slavery in South Carolina and Georgia as a free man (56-57). Still, selections from The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself are included in this anthology of African American literature while Prince’s narrative is entirely omitted.

A family tree may solve this problem of exclusion. Because a family tree allows one to read a family’s history, I think that as a trope, a family tree presents at least one way that we might read the literary tradition so that it is inclusive of Mary Prince as well as Olaudah
Equiano. For the purpose of this dissertation, however, I want to limit this discussion to the African American autobiographical tradition and fiction.

Since Olaudah Equiano was "the first black autobiographer in English" and "the prophet, if not the father, of Afro-American autobiography" (Andrews 56, 60), he is the forefather in this tradition. By the same token, since The African is regarded "a work of major importance in African literature" (Edwards and Dabydeen 54) and "the prototype of the Black novel" (Samuels 729), Equaino is the forefather of black literatures of the African Diaspora, as well. To literally define the place of Mary Prince on the tree, let us stipulate that A West Indian Slave is a sort of "first" in nineteenth-century world literatures of the black diaspora. By Moira Ferguson, Prince's narrative is deemed unique because it "combines aspects of the eighteenth century British slave narrative, the nineteenth century U.S. narrative, and the format of recorded court cases" of female slave abuse as reported in the British Anti-Slavery Reporter, a newspaper with which Thomas Pringle certainly would have been acquainted (24).

Scholars of Afro-Caribbean literature also regard A West Indian Slave a sort of "first." In "The Heartbeat of a West Indian Slave: The History of Mary Prince," Sandra Pouchet Pacquet claims that A West Indian Slave is not only representative of New World slavery as it was acted out in the British Caribbean, but also that it is a precursor of West Indian autobiography (132, 144). She points out the commonality of themes, such as a "national self-consciousness" and the use of vernacular as an appropriate language for telling one's story as examples (133, 135-137). Likewise, Brenda F. Berrian argues that themes, which were set forth in A West Indian Slave recur in Afro-Caribbean literature. The mother-
daughter relationship, for example, with the mother figure as the transmitter of culture and history, is a common theme in British Caribbean women's "coming-of-age novels" (204). Let us stipulate further that, since to the best of our current knowledge, A West Indian Slave is the earliest known first-person narrative by a black woman; and that, since many of the defining conventions of nineteenth-century African American first-person narratives were handled so well by Prince, that she is the foremother in the African American autobiographical tradition.

As foreparents of black literatures of the African Diaspora, Equiano and Prince inform the African American autobiographical tradition. Thus, Frederick Douglass inherits two unique narrative traditions: one male and African, the other female and Afro-Caribbean. And thus is born the African American slave narrative, a sub-genre of African American autobiography. From this sub-genre, the African American novel in its various forms, was born.\textsuperscript{17} Examples include the historical novel, the "first" of which—at least to the best of our current knowledge—was Douglass's novella, The Heroic Slave (1853)\textsuperscript{18}; the "autobiographical" novel, Wilson's Our Nig (1859)\textsuperscript{19}; the novel of passing, Charles W. Chesnutt, The House Behind the Cedars (1900); the experimental novel, Jean Toomer's Cane (1923)\textsuperscript{20}; the coming-of-age novel, Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937); and, most recently, the neo-slave narrative, the first of which was Margaret Walker's Jubilee (1966).\textsuperscript{21}

From the "first" historical novel to contemporary neo-slave narratives, African American and Afro-Caribbean novelists have taken as their subjects enslaved men and women whose lives were considered unimportant and therefore left out of American cultural, literary,
and historical experiences. Examples include Arna Bontemps' *Black Thunder* (1936), Ernest Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976), Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Sally Hemings* (1979) and *Echo of Lions* (1989), Sherley Ann Williams' *Dessa Rose* (1986), Maryse Conde's *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (1986), and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). In other words, these novelists return to the ancestral roots of the tradition and imaginatively reclaim culturally and historically unexceptional enslaved persons of African descent. Like Morrison, they engage in "a kind of literary archeology: on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork...[they] journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply" ("Site of Memory" 112). That they do presents readers and critics with other contexts for reading, writing, and telling the lives of "disremembered and unaccounted for" persons.

As a trope for reading the African American autobiographical tradition, a family tree illustrates and defines Prince's place as a foremother in this tradition. Chapter IV titled, "*When and Where Mary Prince Enters...* and the African American Autobiographical Tradition," is an analysis of conventions and form in the narratives of Mary Prince and Frederick Douglass. Implicit in the title, which is an allusion to Anna Julia Cooper's position that men can never be representative of the whole,\(^22\) is my position that *A West Indian Slave* is not only a representative work but also a model of African American autobiography.
1. In this work "black" is a plural racial designation that is not limited by difference. In speaking of persons of African descent throughout the Americas, for example, I use this term. Likewise, "Afro-Caribbean" is an inclusive designation for persons of African descent anywhere in the Caribbean. Limited racial designations include African American and Afro-Brazilian. These limit the experiences to persons of African descent born in the United States and Brazil respectively. See Molefi Kete Asante, "The Essential Grounds," Afrocentricity (Trenton, NJ: African World P, 1991) 11; and Michael L. Conniff and Thomas J. Davis, "Notes on Terminology," Africans in the Americas: A History of the Black Diaspora (New York: St. Martin's P, 1994) ix. I refer to persons of African ancestry in the United States as "African Americans" rather than "Afro-Americans," because presently it is a more widely accepted term by this group. "Mulatto" and "bi-racial" denote persons of mixed racial ancestry. Mulatto is a nineteenth-century cross-cultural racial designation. Bi-racial is a more recent term. In the context of this project, both terms refer to mixed-race persons with a black parent, usually the mother, and a white parent, typically the father.


8. Although Moira Ferguson dates her work with Prince's narrative to 1985 (27), William L. Andrews writes that the reclamation of A West Indian Slave began in 1987; see
9. According to Beverley Thompson, no “detailed programme information” is available either. E-mail to author, 25 June 1998.

10. I borrow the phrase “in dialogue” from Cheryl A. Wall, Introduction, Changing Our Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1991) 1-15. In her introduction, Wall discusses the problematic of contexts, that is, of self-conscious “positionality,” in reading and writing about works by and about black women. Over time, she argues that black women critics have not only used varied theoretical approaches (e.g., historical, social, feminist, and black feminist) but also have changed their minds about approaches. Wall concludes this article by drawing attention to female protagonists in works by black women who have had to assert their “right to speak,” that is, to “exchange” ideas, just as Wall and other black women critics of African American literature do in Changing Our Words.

11. “Saving the Life That Is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist’s Life” 3-14.


17. For a discussion of the novel, see *The Oxford Companion* 541-550.


CHAPTER 2

WHETHER MARY PRINCE KNEW IT OR NOT,

THE LIFE SHE SAVED WAS HER OWN

It is, in the end, the saving of lives that we writers are about. Whether we are ‘minority’ writers or simply ‘majority.’ It is simply in our power to do this. . . .

We do it because we care. We care that Vincent Van Gogh mutilated his ear. We care that behind a pile of manure in the yard he destroyed his life. We care that Scott Joplin’s music lives! We care because we know this: the life we save is our own.

— Alice Walker, “Saving the Life That Is Your Own,” In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens

To the best of our current knowledge, Mary Prince may well have been an early example of an Afro-Caribbean ex-slave woman whose desire to tell her story was taken seriously by the British Anti-Slavery Society. Or, she may well have been an early example of an Afro-Caribbean ex-slave woman who was so persistently insistent on telling her own story that members of the British Anti-Slavery Society decided that they ought to take both Prince and her story seriously. This is but another detail of Prince’s life that we may never
know. What we do know, however, is that although Prince was born into a world that was obsessed with color, she had the audacity to define herself a human being. We know too that she was one of several children of concerned parents, a sister to unmentioned brothers and briefly mentioned sisters, and a wife who loved her husband. We know also that even as Prince experienced a kind of childhood innocence under slavery, which was followed by the painful awareness of her enslavement and continuous reminders of the same, she nonetheless gave herself permission to make decisions about her own life and then courageously went about living that life as a human being, regardless. By telling the story of her life as a slave woman, Mary Prince also reveals her life as a remarkable Afro-Caribbean woman who insisted on defining herself (Berrian 200-216; Bracks 3-28).

In about 1788, Mary Prince was born (Edwards and Dabydeen 154; Ferguson 2) “on a farm in Brackish Pond, Devonshire Parish, Bermuda,” a British colony which lies “about 600 miles from the coast of Virginia” (Ferguson 2). Bermuda was probably discovered by the Spanish in the early sixteenth century, and remained uninhabited until the colonists, who were en route to Virginia, shipwrecked on the island in 1609. It became a British possession in 1684, just over one century prior to Prince’s birth. According to Ferguson, the total population in Bermuda in 1788 was between 10,000 and 11,000; of that number, 5,000 were enslaved men and women of African ancestry (3). Perhaps some were native Africans, while others were “Creoles,” i.e., persons of African ancestry born in the Americas.¹

Included among the 5,000 foreign and locally-born slaves were Mary Prince’s parents. Her father’s name was Prince; she does not mention her mother’s name.² What also remains unknown about her parents is whether they were African-born slaves, and if they were, to
which ethnic group they belonged (Conniff and Davis 75-79; Craton 229); or, whether they were “Creoles,” and if so, whether they were first, second or third generation (Ferguson 32).

Sketchy though Prince’s background may be, there are three seemingly indisputable facts. First, in accord with British law, Prince inherited her mother’s social and political status as slave (Conniff and Davis 81). Second, since she was born in the Americas, she was a “Creole.” And third, because of the historical and cultural moment into which she was born, Prince was, according to Conniff and Davis, “socialized into the institution of slavery from birth” (79).

As was customary of slave cultures in the Americas, Prince’s parents had different masters and lived in different places. Until about age twelve, Prince lived with her mother on a farm in Brackish-Pond, Bermuda, and was thus the property of her mother’s master. Her father lived a relatively short distance away in Crow-Lane (47). Despite this fact, Prince’s parents managed to maintain a sort of nuclear family structure that Lean’tin L. Bracks defines as “a household of kinships” (37). Perhaps the most convincing evidence was the time that Prince, as a young teenager, ran away from the verbally and physically abusive Captain John Ingham and Mary Spencer Ingham (Ferguson 4-5) to her mother (60) for protection. It is not unusual that Prince would have run to her mother, since, as Barbara Bush points out in Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838 (1990), “in Caribbean slave society, bonds between mothers and children remained strong despite the extenuating circumstances of slavery” (104). Somehow it was communicated to Prince’s father that Prince had run away and that her mother, his wife, was an accomplice in Prince’s crime. (Prince’s crime was that she removed herself from an abusive situation and sought a safe haven.) As a father who was also
a concerned parent, Prince’s father did not betray her, as Bracks suggests (37), but rather offered protection in the only way he knew how, and in the one way that was consistent with his social and political status in Bermuda: He returned her to her masters (60), abusive though they were.

This incident suggests familial bonding, which is to say, a parent-child relationship existed between Prince and her parents. One might also infer that though Prince’s parents lived apart, there existed a marital relationship between them. Conniff and Davis write:

Formal matrimony among slaves was called for in virtually all European legal codes, yet in fact it was extremely rare. Even the Protestant English did not encourage formal unions among their slaves until the 1820s. Therefore, very few legal marriages were performed among the slaves. This low rate of Christian marriages did not, however, signify an absence of kin or family among the slaves. Evidence from all the slave societies indicates that many male and female slaves lived in settled unions—often for long periods of time—without the formal sanction of church or state. (80)

Robert W. Slennes adds that “settled unions” between enslaved men and women were apparent in other slave societies as well, including the Portuguese colony of Brazil: “Indeed, it would appear that sexual unions of ‘long duration’ . . . say, those of ten years or more—were common among Brazilian slaves” (128). He also argues that it was common in Afro-Brazilian slave societies for children “to not only know their father but also” to “pass their formative years in his company” (128). This seems to have been the case with Prince and her father.

According to Michael Craton, “the nuclear two-headed household was extremely common among the African-born as well as Creole slaves” (229). Of course, by the ruling class in the British Caribbean Islands, this type of family structure was viewed as an economically sound business strategy. Morrissey writes that “at times of labor shortage,
particularly towards the end of the slave trade . . . slave holders tried to breed new slaves by encouraging nuclear family formation” (275). Moreover, Richard B. Sheridan, in Caribbean Slave Society and Economy (1991), argues that “planters conserved their human capital by . . . encouraging family life” (198). Yet despite the fact that Prince’s parents had different owners and lived on separate estates, they managed to maintain a family identity.

Not much else is known about Prince’s parents, since she says little else about them. Her recollections of their deaths are paraphrased in a footnote by Thomas Pringle, the Methodist secretary of the British Anti-Slavery Society and Prince’s editor (Dabydeen and Edwards 155; Ferguson 11).

She says, her father died while she and her mother were at Turk’s Island; and that he had been long dead and buried before any of his children in Bermuda knew of it, they being slaves of other estates. Her mother died after Mary went to Antigua. (66)

We do not know how Prince felt about being absent for her parents’ burials (Pacquet, African American Review 137). To be sure, there are silent spaces in Mary Prince’s dictated autobiography. These silences raise questions concerning editorial tampering. Why has this portion of her personal history been edited out of her narrative and paraphrased in a footnote? Why does Pringle speak for Prince?

There are three likely explanations for silent spaces. In the Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South (1978), John W. Blassingame reminds us that one explanation may be attributed to the fact that ex-slave autobiographers “were confined by the conventions of the genre” (368). James Olney, in The Slave’s Narrative (1985), supports Blassingame’s theory:
When the abolitionists invited an ex-slave to tell his story of experience in slavery to an anti-slavery convention, and when they subsequently sponsored the appearance of that story in print, they had certain clear expectations, well understood by themselves and well understood by the ex-slave too, about the proper content to be observed, the proper theme to be developed, and the proper form to be followed. (158-159)

Although presently there is no evidence that Prince was a spokesperson for the British Anti-Slavery Society, a standard convention of the genre was that the ex-slave provide “a sketchy account of parentage” (Olney 153). The “form” neither allowed for incidental information concerning the lives of the ex-slave’s parents nor the ex-slave’s feelings and thoughts about the deaths of his/her parents. This information was neither considered “the proper content” nor “the proper theme to be developed.” As William L. Andrews notes in To Tell a Free Story, “abolitionists naturally felt that the most useful black autobiographies would be ones that forced the ugly facts of ‘the peculiar institution’ to the forefront of a reader’s attention and kept them there throughout the story” (6). Hence, the footnote, since the standard “form” could not accommodate this extratextual information: “Even if an editor faithfully reproduced the facts of a black narrator’s life, it was still the editor who decided what to make of these facts, how they should be emphasized, in what order they should be presented, and what was extraneous, or germane” (Andrews 20).

Most recently, and particularly with regard to Prince’s oral autobiography, Moira Ferguson cites other silent spaces, which she refers to as a “pattern of omissions” (3). These include Prince’s awareness of slave resistance in Bermuda (3), sexual abuse (4, 28), her seven-year interracial affair with Captain Abbot, and her “never mentioned” children (14, 20). To these silent spaces, Jenny Sharpe adds Prince’s “sexual relationships with free men” and
Mr. Wood's decision to sell Prince "on at least one occasion" (44, 53). Ferguson concludes that "Mary Prince's difficulty in being able to present her authentic experience stemmed partly from the form that was required" (4), and Ziggi Alexander concurs: "Mary Prince's true voice [was indeed] hidden behind abolitionist themes" (xi).

A second explanation for silent spaces has to do with literacy, or in the case of Prince, semi-literacy. That Mary Prince did not pen her autobiography, but rather "related" her lived experience to Miss Susanna Strickland, a recent "Methodist convert" (Ferguson 11), suggests that she was incapable of writing her own story. Prince recounts the time that Miss Fanny began teaching her the alphabet and how to spell:

   Dear Miss Fanny! She was a sweet, kind young lady, and so fond of me that she wished me to learn all that she knew herself; and her method of teaching me was as follows: — Directly she had said her lessons to her grandmamma, she used to come running to me, and make me repeat them one by one after her; and in a few months I was able not only to say my letters but to spell many small words. (49)

Prince was barely 12 years old at the time.

Three masters later and months following her baptism by the Rev. Mr. Curtin of the English Church in Antigua, Prince was reintroduced to education by missionaries:

   The Moravian ladies (Mrs. Richter, Mrs. Olufsen, and Mrs. Sauter) taught me to read in the class; and I got on very fast. In this class there were all sorts of people, old and young, grey headed folks and children; but most of them were free people. After we had done spelling, we tried [italics mine] to read in the Bible. (73)

It is the word "tried" that raises questions about Prince's ability to give written expression to certain aspects of her lived experience, some of which, no doubt, were painful. For
example, her humiliating experience on the auction block in Hamble Town (52-53); the Sunday morning that she witnessed her mother's madness on Turk's Island (66); and the bathtub incident in Antigua (67-68). Furthermore, by Prince's own admission, she lacked an appropriate language with which to adequately convey the experience of female suffering under slavery: "I wish I could find words to tell you all I then felt and suffered" (51).

This conventional statement is uttered by other ex-slaves (Andrews, A Free Story 9-10), including Frederick Douglass, the "literate narrator" and "articulate hero." In his 1845 autobiography, Douglass writes: "I have no language to express the high excitement and deep anxiety which were felt among us poor slaves during this time" (64). But as Robert B. Stepto says, "What makes Douglass's narration and control of his tale is his extraordinary ability to pursue several types of writing with ease and with a degree of simultaneity" (20). Hence, there is quite a difference between Douglass's confessed inability to find words adequate to convey the experience and Prince's.

For one thing, in Douglass's self-authored autobiography, he constructs himself as a self-taught man. In Prince's dictated autobiography, she is constructed as having received an elementary education (Carby 37). Such a representation is supported by Caribbean cultural historians and British literary historians as accurate. In "The World They Made—the Politics of Missionary Education to British West Indian Slaves, 1800-1833," Patricia T. Rooke posits that although missionaries, such as the "Moravian ladies," were primarily concerned with "converting sinners" to Christianity, they did provide "a rudimentary education for a part of the slave population" in the British West Indies (60). Paul Edwards and David Dabydeen add that
Literacy in English among black slaves, while encouraged by a few missionaries and sympathetic individuals, was fiercely opposed by most planters and slave-owners, who feared that demands for emancipation would be encouraged and given a voice. (x)

Moreover, Hilary Beckles suggests that the literate slave population was small, that "no more than 2 percent of British Caribbean slaves were literate in the early nineteenth century" (120). Although it is possible that Prince's rudimentary education would have qualified her for this "2 percent," chances are slim that it did. If it had, then more than likely she would have written her own story, just as Harriet Ann Jacobs did. Jacobs' original intention was not to compose her autobiography but rather to dictate it to Harriet Beecher Stowe (Yellin 264-265).

For another, whereas Douglass's "hunger" for knowledge, which symbolizes his quest for literacy (i.e., freedom and humanity), is a central theme of his autobiography,¹¹ it is not in Prince's since her claim to freedom and humanity are not contingent upon her ability to write her own story, but rather, the right to be the sole possessor of her own body (Pacquet 135).

But just as Prince is silenced or silent about the deaths of her parents (either because of the constraints of the genre or because she lacked authorial control), she is also silenced or silent about extended family and siblings. Apparently, she says nothing about maternal and paternal grandparents, aunts and uncles. What is known about her seven brothers, according to Pringle's footnote, is that Prince knows nothing about them (66). Their names are not even mentioned. She does, however, mention her three sisters: Hannah, Dinah and Rebecca. With Hannah and Dinah, Prince was placed on the auction block (52) when she was about
twelve years old (48). They were each sold to different masters (53). The year was about 1800, nine years after Jamaica passed legislation which stipulated that “slave families should be preserved as far as possible when sold.” Rebecca, Prince’s youngest sister, was born sometime after the auction. Prince did not meet her until Rebecca was about four years old (66). In the same footnote, Pringle summarizes the fate of Prince’s sisters:

... she knows nothing further than this — that the eldest sister, who had several children to her master, was taken by him to Trinidad; and that the youngest, Rebecca, is still alive, and in slavery in Bermuda. (66)

Sharpe argues that Pringle’s footnotes de-authorize Prince, who probably related her story in “patois, the creolized speech of slaves that combined English, Spanish, French, and West African languages,” while simultaneously authorizing the text, which was written in standard English (38). Thus, a third explanation for silent spaces, according to Sharpe, has to do with perceived notions regarding language and intelligence: To shift from Prince’s patois to standard English is to move from the inferior and unintelligible to the superior and intelligible.

In Black Women Writing Autobiography, Joanna M. Braxton contends that nineteenth century “narratives . . . are often fraught with gaps in content and chronology” (205). This seems to be true of male- and female-centered narratives. Although Frederick Douglass exercised authorial control over his 1845 autobiography (Stepto 17), there are “gaps” in his story as well. He is also silent about “the fate of his brothers and sisters” (Blight 19) as well as the courtship of his wife and their life together.
Prince’s childhood is brought to an abrupt end at about age twelve. Up to this point, her childhood under slavery has been relatively uneventful. She and her young mistress were playmates (47) and her chores, as she says, “were light” (48). Two events signal the finality of her childhood innocence. First, because of financial difficulties, Prince is “hired . . . out” to Mrs. Pruden, who lives “five miles off,” and is used as a nurse (48-49). Second, with the death of Mrs. Williams, her first mistress, Prince is returned to Mr. Williams and sold (49-50). Thus, the twelfth year marks a turning point in Prince’s life.

Childhood, according to Deborah Gray White, is the first identifiable phase in the life of slave women in the southern United States. In this first “cycle” male and female slave children are segregated by age and engage in non-gender-specific play and work, usually as “nurses” (92-93). In the second “cycle,” when boys and girls are about “twelve to sixteen” years of age, they are introduced to slavery (94-95). During this phase, slave teenagers work very hard (95). For slave girls, this is an especially important phase because at about age fifteen, they experience menarche (94). The “late teens and early twenties” are the female slave’s childbearing years (98-108), and with her first-born, she automatically enters the motherhood phase (108-114). In this “cycle,” she may also marry. When the slave woman is no longer able to conceive, at about ages “thirty-nine or forty,” she enters the “middle-aged” phase of her life. Labor, during this “cycle,” is non-gender-specific and “intensive” (114). The last “cycle” is “old age.” Women, in this phase, become “grannies” to slave children and also serve “as nurses and midwives” (115-117).

Although the above-defined are culturally-specific “cycles,” several are evident in Prince’s life after her twelfth year. For the purpose of this paper, I will refer to her childhood
as Phase One; her early teen years as Phase Two; her childbearing years and motherhood as Phase Three; and middle age as Phase Four. It should be noted that there are three identifiable rites of passage in Prince’s life: Phase One, as mentioned above, signals the end of childhood under slavery; and Phases Two and Three mark her initiation into the world of slavery and slave womanhood, respectively. In Phase Four, however Prince’s story becomes a nineteenth century success story, a story of self-reliance.

In Phase Two, her early teen years, Prince lived in Spanish Point, Bermuda. In this phase, Prince is taught about the kind of life she should expect to live by Hetty, who becomes like a surrogate mother. Prince works very hard and is exploited economically. She also witnesses many horrors—e.g., the mistreatment of slave children (56) and the murder of Hetty (57)—and is subjected to severe physical and emotional abuse at the hands of both mistress (56) and master (58, 59). She runs away once and sasses her master once (60). A few years later, Prince is sold and is not allowed to say good-by to her family (60).

Whereas Phase Two is Prince’s rite of passage into the world of slavery (Pacquet 138, 141), Phase Three marks her rite of passage into slave womanhood. This phase is spent in the salt ponds at Turks Island where Prince is a fieldhand and in the city of Grand Quay, Bermuda where she is a house slave (62, 65). While in Grand Quay, Prince has an epiphany. She realizes that white women, like slave women, can be assaulted by white men (67). She realizes also that slave women can be subjected to both physical and sexual abuse by these same white men, and that white women will only remain silent (67, 68). In Hazel V. Carby’s analysis of African American female slave/white slave mistress relations in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,¹³ she makes the point that slave women could and did sympathize with
their white mistresses who, like slave women, were "subject to forms of patriarchal abuse and exploitation" (54). She argues further that slave women "waited in vain for a reciprocal display of kindness and sympathy" from their mistresses (54). Like African American slave women, Prince realizes that her oppression is both racial and gendered (Bush 8; White 15).

It is in this Phase that Prince should have had children. Typically, by age nineteen, Afro-American slave women had at least one child (White 97). Claire Robertson suggests that "[T]he age at first birth for slave women was usually nineteen or twenty, or approximately five years after reaching puberty" (27).14 According to B. W. Higman, "Creoles under 20 were most fertile" (271). Prince was a Creole and was about 17 years old when she was sold to Mr. D— who sexually abused her. Curiously she does not mention children—not living, dead or otherwise lost children.

The expectation of planters was that slave women in the British Caribbean would have babies and therefore reproduce a free working class.15 To "prolong the life of the slaves and encourage them to breed" (Sheridan 199), "Ameliorative legislation . . . was passed in all British West Indian colonies from about 1787, and particularly after 1823" (Craton 193). Theoretically, this legislation should have improved the material conditions of the slaves' lives—e.g., "health conditions, by regulating the workload, and establishing standards of food, clothing, and medical care" (193). And even though women were rewarded "for delivering a child. . . . [B]etter houses and garden plots" (Morrissey 278), Craton argues that this policy was ineffective (193).16 Richard B. Sheridan (199) and Marietta Morrissey (283), on the other hand, argue that ameliorative legislation was successful, that it not only increased the free labor population but also reduced "infant mortality" (Morrissey 283).
It is conceivable that given the material conditions of Prince’s life, she was unable to have children. “Physical abuse” and/or physically demanding labor might have rendered her sterile. Disease, malnutrition, “poor diets” and/or any other number of health problems could have led to infertility or an increased likelihood of miscarriages. Apparently slave women throughout the New World were subject to miscarriages. Frances Ann Kemble, a European actress who became at once the wife of a southern American planter and a slave mistress, records her first-hand experiences with slave women who had miscarried in *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839* (1863). Sally and Mile had had one each (229, 240); Venus and Molly, two each (245-246); and Sarah, Sukey, and Die had had four each (230, 240). Likewise, slave women in the Portuguese colony of Brazil were also vulnerable to miscarriages. Conniff and Davis note “quality of life” and poor “diets” as contributing factors (96).

It is also conceivable that since Prince does not mention children, that she might have made a conscious decision not to bring children into a world where they would have few, if any, choices concerning their bodies and lives. If she made such a decision, then her options would have been to abort her unborn children or to commit infanticide. It is likely that such acts of resistance were employed by slave women throughout the African Diaspora. This is true of slave women in the French West Indies, Brazil, the United States, and the British West Indies.22

There are a number of examples of slave women who, some would argue, loved their children too much and/or hated the idea that through their reproduction they were supporting
the institution of slavery so much that they took the lives of their own babies. Lou Smith recalls such a woman:

My mother told me that he [the master] owned a woman who was the mother of seven children, and when her babies would get about a year or two of age, he’d sell them and it would break her heart. She never got to keep them. When her fourth baby was born and was about two months old, she just studied all the time about how she would have to give it up, and one day she said, ‘I just decided I’m not going to let ol’ master sell this baby; he just ain’t going to do it.’ She got up and give it something out of a bottle and pretty soon it was dead. (Lester 40)

Perhaps the most famous example is Margaret Garner, the Kentucky slave woman, who slit the throat of her infant daughter and then took a shovel and struck two of the boys, all in an attempt to keep them from having to return to their brutal life. . . . In a final attempt to free herself and her children, Garner threw herself and at least one child into the Ohio River. (Hine 607-609)23

Finally, there is the “woman named Lucy” who, with the help of her mother and midwife, claimed her dead “child had been stillborn” (Hine 608). Unlike Garner, who was tried, separated from her family, and sold to the Deep South, Lucy and her accomplices were not convicted because the state could not disprove their defense (608).

Both abortion and infanticide were regarded as criminal offenses in the United States (Fox-Genovese 324, 329) and the British West Indies (Moitt 252-253). But neither act of resistance would have been inconsistent with Prince’s character, since from the time that she was a young teenager, Prince resisted externally imposed definitions of herself as less than human. In each phase of her life Prince recounts the constancy of her resistance, the ultimate of which was the telling of her own story (Bracks 32).
It is conceivable as well that Mary Prince did have children. Suppose that some (or all) of her children were fathered by Mr. D——, her master and rapist. Suppose that those that survived a high infant mortality\textsuperscript{24} were taken from Prince and sold at public auctions, just as she and her sisters were auctioned in about 1800. Suppose further that the revelation of this particular aspect of Prince’s life is so painful that she willfully withholds this information (Braxton 22) from Miss Susanna Strickland. Sharpe refers to Prince’s willful silences as “self-imposed” (53). Although speculative, these suppositions are in fact as likely as the possibilities that Prince could not have children, that she practiced some form of contraception, or that she decided that she would rather see her babies dead than merely existing as the living dead. Whether Prince had children or not, and whether Mr. D—— fathered her children or not, is unknown. Because she does not mention children, she bypasses—as narrator of her life, at least—the motherhood phase and thus automatically enters the next phase.

Phase Four, Prince’s mature or middle-age years, are lived in St. John’s, Antigua and London, England. By Mr. and Mrs. John A. Wood, Prince is re-named “Molly Wood.” Apparently she discussed the several names by which she was called with her amanuensis, because in a footnote Pringle directs the reader’s attention to the problem of naming in the British Caribbean (74). Also in this Phase, Prince is a “washerwoman” (Ferguson 12), a fairly common trade in the British West Indies,\textsuperscript{25} and she has an affair with white Captain Abbot. But most importantly, in this phase Prince becomes a self-reliant woman (Pacquet 139), fully capable of making life-altering decisions. Her first decision was to choose her own husband; her second was to free herself from the Woods.

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Sometime following her arrival at Antigua, Prince began attending the Moravian Church and subsequently converted to Moravianism. In the early nineteenth century, there were “188 slaves” of African descent “per square mile” in the 171 square mile island of Antigua (Higman 223). The Methodist and Moravian churches, according to Elsa Goveia, were quite successful at converting slave men and women in the Leeward Islands to Christianity (qtd. in Morrissey 277). These converts, says Michael Mullin, “were known as ‘good’ slaves” (243). Prince’s very words offer testimony to the truthfulness of Mullin’s claim, because what she learned about religion from “the Moravian ladies” was that she “was a great sinner”; that she needed “to be good” so that when she died she could go to heaven; and that she should obey and respect her masters.

I dearly loved to go to the church, it was so seldom. I never knew rightly that I had much sin till I went there. When I found out that I was a great sinner, I was very sorely grieved, and very much frightened. I used to pray God to pardon my sins for Christ’s sake, and forgive me for everything I had done amiss; and when I went home to my work, I always thought about what I had heard from the missionaries, and wished to be good that I might go to heaven [italics mine]. (73)

Furthermore, argues Mullin, “Black Moravians of the Antigua station, the largest anywhere, were especially cooperative and assimilated” (243).

Moravians also advocated monogamous relationships between enslaved men and women converts (Morrissey 277). Thus, “religious instruction” (Conniff and Davis 82) was generally given in “classes arranged by sex and age” so as to ensure that converts were meeting potential age-appropriate mates of the opposite sex (Mullin 248). It was not in this setting, however, that Mary Prince met Daniel James.
Living in a town such as St. John’s, Prince had ample opportunity to become acquainted with free Afro-Caribbean men and women and to interact with them in various capacities. For example, when Prince attended reading classes taught by the “Moravian ladies” at the Moravian Church, she was a student in a class that consisted primarily of “free people” (73). When Prince resumed her duties in the Wood’s household after recovering from an illness, she worked alongside Martha Wilcox, a free “mulatto,” and subsequently found herself a victim of intra-racial prejudice (69). And when Mr. Wood challenged Prince to find a new master, she turned to Adam White, ” a cooper . . . who had money” (71), for financial assistance.26 Arnold A. Sio27 writes that

Considerable social interaction occurred between the freedmen and the slaves of the towns. . . . Not only did the slaves have more mobility than those on the plantations, many also worked, lived, and carried on a social life away from their masters. Interaction with the slaves on many levels and in a variety of ways rather than with the whites must then have been a feature of everyday life for most of the free people of colour. . . .

Many freedmen existed on the margins of an economy that was dominated by the plantation system. They often found themselves and the slaves similarly situated in the towns, especially with regard to work and living conditions. They lived close to each other, they interacted more frequently with each other than either did with the whites and they shared the same familiar life-space. They often participated in the same religious, economic, educational, and social activities. (152)

Although, Prince does not say how she met Daniel James—“a carpenter and cooper to his trade; an honest, hard-working, decent black man, and a widower” (74)—it is clear that in the town of St. John’s, she could have met him anywhere and at any time.

Prince admires James and respects him for all that he has been able to accomplish as an ex-slave and a now free Afro-Caribbean man. She says that “he had purchased his freedom

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of his mistress, old Mrs. Baker, with money he had earned whilst a slave.... He was very industrious after he bought his freedom; and he had hired a comfortable house, and had convenient things about him” (74). Apparently, he is quite taken with her too, because even though socially and politically she is not a free woman, James proposes marriage. Prince does not say yes right away, but rather, thinks about his proposal. Uncharacteristic of “Black Moravians [who] were cooperative and assimilated,” not once does Prince ask Mr. and Mrs. Wood for permission to marry this man. Not to do so would mean that she was deliberately ignoring the religious instruction she had previously received from the “Moravian ladies.” But this is exactly what Prince does; she disobeys (Ferguson 20). If the primary objective of “religious instruction” was to “make the slaves more tractable” (Conniff and Davis 243), then it certainly did not succeed in this instance, because Mary Prince willfully and knowingly chose to neither “cooperate” nor “assimilate.”

Instead of asking her masters’ permission to marry Daniel James, Prince ponders his proposal and thinks quite seriously about it. Finally, she decides what she should do. Her decision is that she will marry Daniel James but only on condition that he attend church with her and that he convert to Moravianism: “When he asked me to marry him, I took time to consider the matter over with myself, and would not say yes till he went to church with me and joined the Moravians” (74). Of course, Daniel James does both. Says Prince: “We were joined in marriage, about Christmas 1826, in the Moravian Chapel at Spring Gardens, by the Rev. Mr. Olufsen” (74) or by “the Moravian minister, Mr. Ellesen.” Mary Prince James was a middle-age woman of about 38 years old on her wedding day.
As might be expected, the Woods were not happy about Prince’s decision. Oftentimes, as Prince recalls, Mr. and Mrs. Wood humiliated her in the presence of her husband who, though a free man, was unable to protect her: “It made my husband sad to see me so ill-treated” (75). No doubt having been socialized into the institution of slavery himself, and now an ex-slave man living in a slave culture, Daniel James understood the limitations of his role as husband and protector of a slave woman. Sio points out that “the slaves as well as the free blacks, and free coloured — whether free by manumission, self-purchase or birth — were subjected to the racism of the whites. The legal disabilities and discriminatory practices of the whites applied to all non-whites” (157).

An interesting parallel to this aspect of Prince’s life may be found in Harriet Ann Jacobs’ autobiographical writing, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Linda Brent, the protagonist, realizes that the “free born” African American man that she loves and wants to marry (37) will not be able to protect her (42). She realizes that, as her husband, he would only be able to silently watch the abuse and humiliation to which she would be subjected (Fox-Genovese 326; White 16).

Prince’s second decision was to free herself from enslavement. In 1827, a year before Prince accompanied the Woods to England, the sensational case of Grace Jones had already been adjudicated. This case provides the background for Prince’s departure from Antigua as a slave woman, and her arrival in England as a domestic servant in 1828 (Dabydeen and Edwards 154).29

James Somerset was a slave man who, with his master, traveled from the United States to England. While there, he escaped. On November 26, 1771, he was “kidnapped”
by his master, shackled and put “on board the ship Ann and Mary, which was bound for Jamaica.”

It was intended that in Jamaica Somerset would be re-enslaved. Before the Ann and Mary could sail, however, the Captain was ordered to return Somerset to British authorities. Months later, on Monday, June 22, 1772, Lord Mansfield “delivered the unanimous judgment of the Court of King’s Bench. . . . that black slaves in England could not forcibly be removed from England” (ix).

Shyllon (212) and Eric Williams (Capitalism 45) believe that the judgment rendered in this case has been incorrectly interpreted as the abolishment of slavery in England. Shyllon points out that “it was not until 1834 that it can truly be said that black slaves in Britain were emancipated, as were their brothers and sisters in British Colonies in the West Indies” (230). The ruling in the Somerset case—“black slaves in England could not forcibly be removed from England”—was the precedent for the 1827 Grace Jones decision.

Jones, a slave woman from Antigua, accompanied her mistress to England in 1822. Until 1823, Jones lived in England as her mistress’s “domestic servant” (Shyllon 210). Then with her mistress, she returned to Antigua. At issue was whether a foreign slave, who, after having traveled with his/her master and/or mistress to England, and thereby becoming “a free British subject,” could be “imported” to a slave holding territory “and there unlawfully held in slavery” (211). Thus, the question before the court was the legality of Jones’s forcible return to Antigua as a slave. Shyllon paraphrases Lord Stowell’s November 6, 1827 decision as follows: “Accordingly, Lord Stowell held that temporary residence in England without manumission suspended, but did not extinguish, the status of slavery of a slave who, after such residence, returned to a country where slavery was legal” (212). In other words, as long
as Jones remained in England, she could be a "domestic servant." But with her voluntary or involuntary return to a country such as Antigua where slavery was legal, her social and political status would be reduced to slave.31 Lord Stowell's ruling was published in British newspapers and critically debated in the same. His ruling was also published in The Antigua Free Press on Friday, December 14, 1827; but the paper was not distributed until the following day, Saturday, December 15, 1827 (Shylon 212-218). If the Woods did not know about the Grace Jones decision prior to their departure from Antigua, certainly they would have learned of it once they arrived in England. So too would Prince.

Into this political climate and amid much controversy and debate (Ferguson 1-2), Mary Prince freed herself from the Woods. She did not steal away in the dark of night. Rather, in the presence of the Woods, Prince opened the door and walked away. By example, she established another means by which the enslaved person might free him/herself.

But what did it mean for this black woman slave to walk away from her only security in London and into the strangeness and aloneness of England? Except for recent friendships, Prince was alone. There was no one with whom she had built relationships overtime, and no one with whom to remember a shared history. Where did this lone black woman slave find the courage to risk everything—husband, kinship ties, cultural familiarity—for the possibility of freedom? Did she consider the cost, and if so, what compelled her to claim her freedom at such a high cost? How easy it would have been for this lone black slave woman to acquiesce. But she does not, and we are left wondering why.

We may never know the reasons why Prince chose the unknown, rather than the familiar. We can only speculate that Mary Prince believed very deeply in something greater
than herself, greater even than those who conceived themselves as the masters of her mind, body, and spirit. We know that this was not a newly found belief, because it was this essence that sustained Prince throughout her lifetime. It was because of her faith and belief in something greater than herself that Prince’s life was of value, if to no other person, then certainly to her. She believed this simply because in the quietness of her spirit, her Creator told her so. How else could this lone black slave woman have willed herself into being? How else could Prince have saved her own life that her story might be told again and again and again? The year of Mary Prince James’s demonstrative act of faith was 1828. She was about 40 years old.

In the next few months, she became a “domestic servant” in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Pringle. Unlike Olaudah Equiano, the “African-born” slave, and Frederick Douglass, the African American slave, both of whom achieved free, public manhood status, Mary Prince did not become a free, public lady. Her world remained within the sphere of domesticity. During this time, she approached Pringle about her desire to tell her story (45), and in 1831 The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself was published. By this time, Prince had been in England three years and was about 43 years old. In her own words, she was “separated from . . . husband . . . country and all old friends and connections” (82). Her dilemma was both political and moral: re-enslavement and the resumption of marital relations with her husband or freedom and aloneness in a foreign country.

Within one year, her narrative had gone into its third printing (Edwards and Dabydeen 154; Ferguson 1). In this same year, according to Edwards and Dabydeen, Prince was examined by a British physician, whose findings were as follows (154): Her back was
permanently scarred because of innumerable floggings; she would probably lose her sight either because of an un-named eye disease or as the result of frequent blows to the head (Ferguson 6); and she suffered with chronic rheumatism (Edwards and Dabydeen 154).

Years after the publication of *A West Indian Slave*, though a free woman in London in the sense that psychologically and physically she freed herself from the Woods, Mary Prince James was in fact a slave. According to the terms of the Emancipation Act of 1833, which went into effect in all British territories the following year, children, ages six years and under, were freed unconditionally. All others would have to serve a term of four years as apprentices for their masters (Conniff and Davis 181; Williams, *The Negro* 54). Although Jenny Sharpe announces Prince’s emancipation date as August 1, 1833 (38), Prince remained the legal property of the Woods until 1838.

According to Moira Ferguson, there is no record of Mary Prince after 1833 (23); Jenny Sharpe, however, believes that Prince vanished “from the official records after February 27, 1831” (38). Whether she returned to Antigua to resume marital relations with Daniel James and re-enslavement, as a consequence, is unknown. Whether she was ever reunited with her siblings—Hannah, Dinah, Rebecca, and other nameless brothers and sisters—countless nieces and nephews, aunts, uncles and cousins, is not known. Unknown too are the circumstances of Prince’s certain but anonymous death. Yet and still, the life Mary Prince saved was indeed her own.
I can only speak for myself. But what I write and how I write is done in order to save my own life. And I mean that literally.

— Barbara Christian, “A Race for Theory,” *Making Face, Making Soul*
Notes


2. The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, Related by Herself, ed. Moira Ferguson (1831; Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), 47. All references are to this edition. Subsequent references will be given parenthetically in the text.


5. Frances Anne Kemble records an anecdote about Sarah, a slave woman who Kemble believes was temporarily insane. Sarah was married to a slave man called Stephen and had been pregnant eleven times ("She had had four miscarriages, had brought seven children into the world, five of whom were dead, and was again with child") and was in poor health. She suffered from back pains and had "an internal tumor," which Kemble believes probably ruptured as a result of hard labor in the fields. According to Kemble, Sarah told Kemble that "[S]he told me she had once been mad and had run into the woods, where she contrived to elude discovery for some time, but was at last tracked and brought back, when she was tied up by the arms, and heavy logs fastened to her feet, and was severely flogged. After this she contrived to escape again, and lived for some time skulking in the woods, and she supposes mad, for when she was taken again she was entirely naked. She subsequently recovered from this derangement. . . . I suppose constant childbearing and hard labor in the fields at the same time may have produced the temporary insanity" (230). Journal on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839, ed. John A. Scott (1863; Athens: The U of Georgia P, 1984). John W. Blassingame provides historical documentation regarding insanity. In tables, he categorizes the insane population in slaveholding states, as well as the blind, idiotic, and deaf and dumb, as follows: year, state, social status, and race. There is no category for gender. (New York: Oxford UP, 1978) 363-366.

6. Black feminist scholars Barbara Smith and Deborah E. McDowell argue that in order to define a black female literary tradition, there must be evidence of a language that is both
black and female. In “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” Smith argues that among twentieth century black women writers there is evidence of a black woman’s literary tradition. She suggests that this evidence—“rootworking, herbal medicine, conjure, and midwifery...[and] Black female language” (174)—may be found in the works of Zora Neale Hurston, Margaret Walker, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker; see The New Feminist Criticism, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon, 1985) 168-185. Joanna M. Braxton, “Outraged Mother and Articulate Heroine: Linda Brent and the Slave Narrative Genre,” theorizes that a black woman’s literary tradition was established in Jacobs’ Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Conventions of this tradition include sass and the archetypal outraged mother. Whereas Prince’s mother is an example of an outraged mother whose spirit has been broken, Brent is the outraged mother who not only manages to save herself and to rescue her children from slavery but also exposes “racial oppression and sexual exploitation.” Embodied in the protagonist/author is the literate and articulate slave woman. Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition within a Tradition (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1989) 18-38. In “New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism,” which was first published in The New Feminist Criticism, McDowell cautions black feminist critics not to overly concern themselves with the commonality of themes and images, but rather, with “the question of ‘female’ language” (14, 16). In The Changing Same: Black Women’s Literature, Criticism, and Theory, she re-thinks this earlier position and adds that since black feminist critics are not a homogenous group, ideology must accompany their critical analysis of black women’s writings (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995) 5-23.


11. Huggins 5; Baker 1984, 43; Blight 5, 19; Smith 1-2; and Stepto 20-21. See the following articles in The Slave’s Narrative: Baker, “Autobiographical Acts and the Voice of the Southern Slave,” 250; James Olney, “I Was Born”: Slave Narratives, Their Status as

12. B. W. Higman, in "Household Structure and Fertility on Jamaican Slave Plantations: A Nineteenth-Century Example," points out that this law was passed in 1791; see Caribbean Slave Society and Economy, 251.


14. There are, of course, exceptions. Afro-Caribbean slave women, Mary and Harriet, were 17 years old with their first born. At age twenty, Mary had "two children, a boy of 3 years, and a girl of 13 months old" (198). Twenty-four year old Harriet's son Jemmy was "about 7 years" old (199). Seeolarin Shyllon, "Slave Advertisements in the British West Indies," Caribbean Studies 18 (October 1978/January 1979): 198 and 199. The Afro-American slave woman, Louisa Picquet, says that her mother was 15 with her first child (6). Picquet also says that she "wasn't quite fourteen" when Mr. Williams bought her to be his concubine (14), and that by age 20, she had given birth to four children; two of them died. See Louisa Picquet, the Octoress: or Inside Views of Southern Domestic Life. Collected Black Women's Narratives, gen. ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1861; New York: Oxford UP, 1988). Furthermore, when Robert Newsom purchased Celia in 1850, she was "approximately 14 years old." Like Picquet, she was to be his concubine. Between 1850 and 1855, she had given birth to two children. See McLaurin, Celia, a Slave 16-28.

15. J. R. Ward points out that "for many years before the abolition of the slave trade planters consistently urged their managers to encourage breeding and avoid purchases 'from the ships'" (83-84); see "The Profitability of Sugar Planting in the British West Indies, 1650-1834," Caribbean Slave Society and Economy, 81-93. Barbara Bush, Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838, writes that "[The] decline in slave numbers after 1807, encouraged a much greater interest in the childbearing potentialities of women slaves" (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990) 39-40.

16. In the United States, pregnancy was also encouraged and rewarded. In his 1845 autobiography, Frederick Douglass writes that when Caroline, the woman Mr. Covey purchased "for a breeder," gave birth to twins within one year of being forced to sleep with a married slave man (let to Covey for the purpose of impregnating Caroline), "Mr. Covey seemed to be highly pleased . . . that nothing they could do for Caroline during her confinement was too good, or too hard, to be done. The children were regarded as being quite an addition to his wealth"; see Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an
American Slave, Written by Himself, 74. Frances Anne Kemble observes that “every woman who is pregnant, as soon as she chooses to make the fact known to the overseer, is relieved of a certain portion of her work in the field. . . . On the birth of a child certain additions of clothing and an additional weekly ration are bestowed on the family. . . . a woman thinks, and not much amiss, that the more frequently she adds to the number of her master’s livestock by bringing new slaves into the world, the more claims she will have upon his consideration and good will” (95). For historical contextualization, see Deborah Gray White. She writes that incentives to reproduce included a lighter work load and attention from the master or overseer (99-100); and that infertile women were sold (100-101).


20. Conniff and Davis 80; Sheridan 198. In the United States, the diets of Afro-American slaves were more nutritious “and disease was less prevalent”; see Claire Robertson, More Than Chattel 27.


23. This incident is revised in Toni Morrison’s Pulitzer Prize winning novel, Beloved.

24. Bush 1996, 206; Conniff and Davis 80, 97; Geggus 267; King 150; Moitt 252-253; Robertson 27; Sheridan 207; and Michael Craton, “Death, Disease and Medicine on the Jamaican Slave Plantations; the Example of Worthy Park, 1767-1838,” Caribbean Slave Society and Economy, 184.

25. Folarin Shyllon points out that this trade was not limited to any particular type of slave woman. As for social status, these women were field slaves as well as house slaves: “Bessy
... either a washer or field negro” (189); “Bess, an excellent washer woman, and a domestic” (190). As for age, they were older women and young women with children: “ESTHER, an elderly woman ... a Washer Woman. ... the African negro woman Hannah, a good washer and ironer, and servant of all work, with her three children—the girl Tiny, about 12, Sue 8 and Eve 4-1/2 years old” (190-191). Finally, as for racial categorization, they were defined as “African negro” (190) and as “Black” (180). See “Slave Advertisements in the British West Indies,” Caribbean Studies 18 (October 1978/January 1979): 175-199.

26. Years later, when sent to find a new master, Prince turned to white Mr. Burchell. Like Adam White, Burchell approached Mr. Wood with an offer which Wood refused. When Prince started earning money on her own time, she saved what she could and borrowed the rest from Captain Abbot, with hopes of purchasing her freedom.


29. In both editions, Ferguson seems unclear about Prince’s arrival date at London and her date of escape. She says that Prince arrived in 1828 (1; Revised Edition 1), and that she escaped in 1827 (10; Revised Edition 11).


33. Kiple and Kiple, in “Deficiency Diseases in the Caribbean,” write that African-born slaves and Creoles suffered from malnutrition. Particularly lacking in their diets was vitamin A, which these writers believe attribute to, among other things, “economic, political, and climatic circumstances” (177). Further, they conclude that West Indian slaves whose diets were deficient in vitamin A suffered from eye diseases, such as “sore eye” and “night blindness” (177). It is likely that Prince’s un-named eye disease might very well have been due to a low daily intake of vitamin A. For the full text, see Caribbean Slave Society and Economy, 173-182.
CHAPTER 3

IN MARY PRINCE’S OWN WORDS:

"I THEN TOOK COURAGE AND SAID...."

Speech is an adult right that Amy, like so many other female characters in Hurston’s and other black women’s writing, must struggle to assert. The risks of speaking are never small—not for Amy or Janie Crawford, Pecola Breedlove or Nel Wright, Selina Boyce or Avey Johnson, but claiming the right to speak is a requisite part of claiming a self.

— Cheryl A. Wall,

Changing Our Words

As the protagonist in A West Indian Slave, Mary Prince is a figure of central importance in the cultural history of the African Diaspora. Although a slave woman living in a society that legalized the inhumane treatment that she and others like herself were subjected to, Prince never believed herself to be less than a genuine human being. Hence, she resisted each and every de-humanizing attempt to reduce her to some less than human thing. Without hesitation, she claimed her “right to speak.” With all deliberation, Prince spoke her truth. Such use of language by slave women was considered “insolence” and was a punishable offense in the British West Indies. In More Than Chattel, Barbara Bush explains:
When legislation banning the whipping of female slaves was introduced in Trinidad in 1823, planters objected strongly. They complained that female slaves were 'notoriously insolent' and were kept in some 'tolerable order' only through fear of punishment, which they deserved more frequently than males. (197)

As Jenny Sharpe points out a reading of Prince's narrative does not allow for "forms of speech capable of contending with the violence of slavery... because of the abolitionist requirement to prove that its narrator was a decent and docile slave" (48). Thus, as protagonist, Mary Prince is heroic because she was one of these insolent black females who resisted slavery by refusing to be silent.

The first time Prince resists, she's a young teenager and has had enough of the physical abuse that she has witnessed firsthand. ¹ At this time in her life, she is the chattel of Captain and Mrs. Ingham of Spanish Point, Bermuda (Ferguson 4-5). She tells Miss Strickland, her amanuensis (Ferguson 11), that she was sold to this couple when she was about 12 years old so that Captain Williams, her recently widowed master, could finance his wedding.² On Prince's first night with her new master and mistress, the "French Black called Hetty" (55) was severely beaten because she did not complete her work before retiring for the night.³ On another day, Prince says that because one of the cows strayed away from the place where Hetty had tied it, Captain I—

flew into a terrible passion, and ordered the poor creature to be stripped quite naked, notwithstanding her pregnancy, and to be tied up to a tree in the yard. He then flogged her as hard as he could lick, both with the whip and cow-skin, till she was all streaming with blood. He rested, then beat her again and again. Her shrieks were terrible. The consequence was that poor Hetty... was delivered after severe labour of a dead child. (57)
Even though, as Barbara Bush writes in *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838* (1990), that “[Under] the Leeward Islands Act of 1798 . . . female slaves ‘five months gone’ were to be employed only on light work and were to be punished by confinement only” (29), Hetty was beaten anyway.⁴ As a result, her child was stillborn. After her recovery from a difficult labor, Hetty “was repeatedly flogged by both master and mistress” (57) and subsequently died an awful death. Prince recollects that Hetty’s body retained so much fluid that it swelled up and finally burst.

Prince also witnessed the physical abuse of two male children: one, a mulatto racial slave, and the other, an “African-born” slave (Conniff and Davis 79).

Seldom a day passed without these boys receiving the most severe treatment, and often for no fault at all. Both my master and mistress seemed to think that they had a right to ill-use them at their pleasure; and very often accompanied their commands with blows, whether the children were behaving well or ill. I have seen their flesh ragged and raw with licks. Lick — lick — they were never secure one moment from a blow, and their lives were passed in continual fear. My mistress was not contented with using the whip, but often pinched their cheeks and arms in the most cruel manner. (56)

Cyrus “was a mulatto . . . who had been bought while an infant in his mother’s arms” (56). Winthrop D. Jordan, in *The White Man’s Burden: Historical Origins of Racism in the United States* (1974), writes that in the West Indies “white men commonly, almost customarily, took Negro women to bed with little pretense at concealing the fact. . . . Negro concubinage was an integral part of island life, tightly woven into the social fabric” (71). Bush dates this wanton sexual exploitation of black women to the “eighteenth-century” when “the black and, even more so, the coloured woman was well established, in the eyes of the white man, in her role as concubine. . . . the belief was prevalent that the slave woman was
always amenable to the sexual advances of white men” (17). In The Negro in the Caribbean (1994), Eric Williams elaborates further on white male/black female relations: “The female slave was denied the right of refusing access of her bed on the part of her owner or his overseer. The refusal of sexual intercourse with a white overseer was equivalent to mutiny. It was not an uncommon thing for a planter to line up his slave girls before his guest who was invited to take his choice for the night. The slave women were defenceless under the regime of slavery. . . .” (57). Such licensed sexual exploitation of slave women in the British West Indies resulted in a population of persons with mixed racial identities. Racial designations for these persons include “mulatto, sambo, quadroon, and metize” (Jordan 86).

In the United States, black women’s bodies could be and were exploited by white men, generally their masters and/or overseers.\textsuperscript{5} Regardless of complexion, according to Angela Davis (12) and Jordan (86), the mulatto offspring of these unions were “socially and legally” black. The most celebrated example is Frederick Douglass (39-40).\textsuperscript{6} Others include William Wells Brown, whose father was a white man by the name of George Higgins (27); and the lesser known Louisa Picquet,\textsuperscript{7} whose mother, like British West Indian slave women, was the concubine of John Randolph, her master:

My mother’s name was Elizabeth. She was a slave owned by John Randolph, and a seamstress in his family. She was fifteen years old when I was born. Mother’s mistress had a child only two weeks older than me. Mother’s master, Mr. Randolph, was my father. So my mother told me. She was forbid to tell who was my father, but I looked so much like Madame Randolph’s baby that she got dissatisfied, and mother had to be sold. Then mother and me was sent to Georgia, and sold. I was a baby— don’t remember at all, but suppose I was about two months old, may be older. (6)\textsuperscript{8}
Deborah Gray White points out that the presence of mulatto children was a testimony about the truth of slavery: that white men were unfaithful to their wives; that slave women were either raped or consented to intercourse; and that white women were socially and legally without rights (40). Perhaps the greatest truth of all is that the bi-racial child was actually a testament to the non-absoluteness of whiteness and blackness, which is to say, the mulatto child challenged the myth of racial purity. Hazel V. Carby proposes that in the slave culture of the United States, which was so rigidly defined as either black or white, the mulatto actually offered an opportunity for a greater cultural understanding regarding the ways in which blacks and whites interacted socially and sexually (313). According to William L. Andrews, Douglass “deconstructs binary oppositions,” such as blackness and whiteness, in his 1845 autobiography (Free Story 131). Yet and still, Douglass, Brown, and Picquet were classified as blacks.

Unlike the Portuguese colony of Brazil in which an Afro-Brazilian mulatto “could pass as a pseudo white” and therefore receive “better treatment” (Conniff and Davis 102)—e.g., manumission, education, job-related skills—the majority of African American mulatto children, who were born to free white men and slave women, inherited the social and political status of the mother. The same holds true for many Afro-Caribbean mulatto slave children. According to Conniff and Davis, the only condition under which the British West Indian mulatto child could be born free was if “the father granted manumission before the birth” (81). That Cyrus was sold while in his mother’s arms not only indicates that his mother was a slave woman, but also that Cyrus inherited her status. Furthermore, that Cyrus was “a
mulatto" is a testament that his unmentioned father was white. The circumstances of Cyrus’s birth and enslavement are not unlike Douglass’s, Brown’s, and Picquet’s.

Jack, on the other hand, is an African-born slave. Like Olaudah Equiano, he is from "the coast of Guinea" (56). His parents, from whom he is orphaned, are African as well. Jack is in the Americas because he was captured in West Africa (either by Africans or Europeans) and, via the Middle Passage, transported to the Americas where he is being transformed into a slave. Essential to this transformation is the matter of his African name, which Ali A. Mazrui discusses in The Africans: A Triple Heritage (1986):

The dis-Africanisation [sic] of the imported captives took a variety of forms. There was first the dis-Africanisation of personal identity for each individual. It was decided by the masters that the slaves should not carry the names they had borne in their own cultures. . . . Slavery forced them to adopt Anglo-Saxon, Hebraic or related Western names. (110)

Hence, this captured African-born slave is no longer called by his African name, but rather, has been re-named/re-defined and is now called Jack. Equiano was re-named Jacob, Michael, then finally Gustavus Vassa (Equiano 34-35). Presumably Jack was born free in Africa, as was Equiano. And like Equiano, Jack now finds himself in the Americas, where he has "been given or sold" (56) to Captain and Mrs. Ingham, who abuse and mistreat both him and Cyrus.

Prince has also had enough of the abuse that she herself has suffered. She tells Miss Strickland that when a cracked earthen jar broke as she was emptying its contents, Mrs. Ingham dis-robed Prince and then proceeded to flog Prince until she (Mrs. Ingham) was fatigued. Prince’s body, like Hetty’s, was publicly displayed for this punishment. That
evening, when Captain Ingham returned home, he assailed Prince both verbally ("with every name he could think of") and physically by striking her with "several heavy blows." The following day, and for the same offense, Captain Ingham beat Prince with open or closed hands (Prince doesn't say which, only that he used his hands rather than the "cow-skin"). Prince says that while giving her "a hundred lashes," Captain Ingham would take breaks and that during these breaks, Mrs. Ingham would offer him a beverage: It was a very warm day ("the weather was very sultry"). Once he was feeling refreshed and had regained his strength, Captain Ingham continued assaulting Prince (58).

On another occasion, Prince relives Hetty's experience. When a cow that she has tied to a stake gets away, Prince is kicked and beaten by Captain Ingham. Perhaps because she remembers Hetty's punishment for this same offense, Prince makes a conscious decision to run away. Not only was this an act of resistance but also is a punishable offense: "Slaves guilty of running away . . . were tried by slave courts consisting of two or more justices acting without a jury" (Bush, Slave Women 27). Prince was aware of this fact, as were all slaves, no matter where in the Americas they were enslaved. As Goveia writes, "every island passed laws for the pursuit, capture, suppression, and punishment of runaway slaves; and these laws were usually severe. Similar police regulations were made in islands other than those of the British" (351). Nevertheless, Prince runs from her cruel master to her mother, who lives "about five miles" away in Brackish-Pond (Ferguson 5). She runs to her mother for two reasons: (1) she wants protection from what she believes will be an "unfair punishment" (Conniff and Davis 62); and, (2) because "bonds between mothers and children remained strong despite the extenuating circumstances of slavery" (Bush 104).
But Prince’s father, who probably has been a slave all of his life, knows and understands the consequences of his daughter’s fugitive status, as well as his and her mother’s complicity: “Concealment of runaways was also punished” (Bush 27). So he returns her to Captain and Mrs. Ingham, and to Captain Ingham, he says:

‘Sir, I am sorry that my child should be forced to run away from her owner; but the treatment she has received is enough to break my 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 in the future.’ (60)

Prince’s father apologizes for her behavior, but logically reasons that she was right to flee. He expresses his concern about her ill-treatment; he is her father after all, and it hurts him to see his child mis-treated. Then he invites Captain Ingham to empathize with him, as any father whose child has been abused and mis-treated might. Finally, he pleads with Captain Ingham to treat his daughter as a human being and that he (Captain Ingham) imagine himself a human being, as well.

It is on this day that Mary Prince first uses language to defend herself. Quite deliberately, she says: “I then took courage and said that I could stand the floggings no longer” (60). That Prince says “I then took courage” is indicative of her awareness that there might be, and probably would be, serious repercussions for what she was about to say. But she says it anyway: “I could stand the floggings no longer.” No doubt, it is because of Mary Prince (and other black women like her) that the Trinidadian planters objected to outlawing the whip. Certainly, they would have considered this incident another example of those
“nortoriously insolent” black women who “deserved” whippings “more frequently than males.” Curiously Captain Ingham does not whip Prince.

The wonder, however, is not that Captain Ingham does not “flog” this sassy young teenager. Rather, it is that even though the culture into which Mary Prince was born does not affirm her humanity (or Hetty’s or Cyrus’s or Jack’s), she nonetheless believes that she is indeed a human being and therefore deserves to be treated as a human being. The wonder is that despite everything—murder with impunity, extreme cruelty, unfair punishments, and verbal and emotional abuse—Prince can and does believe that human beings (including herself, Hetty, Cyrus, and Jack) should be treated with dignity and respect. The wonder is that without hesitation and with all deliberation, Mary Prince claims her right to speak and then unapologetically speaks her truth.

At the time of this significant moment in the cultural history of enslaved peoples of African descent in the Americas, Prince is a young teenager whose inheritance and socialization have been one and the same: Slavery. Yet she behaves in a way that should have been uncharacteristic of enslaved persons, behavior that could very easily be defined as “womanish”—i.e., “outrageous, audacious, courageous, willful” (Walker xi)—which is to say, “sassy.” Certainly young Prince’s behavior is all of the above, because in this narrative moment and cultural/historical space, Prince empowers herself by claiming her “right to speak” and thus claims her humanity (Wall 11).

The second time Prince resists, she does so as a young woman who is self-authorized to speak for and on behalf of all women who are victims of abuse, whether they are slave or free, black or white. When she happens on a drunken Mr. D—who is beating his daughter
with closed hands, Prince struggles until she is able to free the daughter ("I strove with all my strength to get her away from him; for she was all black and blue with bruises," p. 67). Then she says Mr. D— turned on her, and when he did, she reminded him that they were not on the "remote... [and] isolated" Turk's Island (Ferguson 2, 8); they were now in Grand Quay, "a small town" in Bermuda (61).

Up to this point in Prince's life, no kindly mistress has intervened on her behalf. Mrs. Ingham, whose "countenance was so stern... and brows were always drawn together into a frown" (54), aggressively participated in Prince's de-humanization. As Prince recounts her experience with this "fearful woman, and... savage mistress" (56), she recalls that Mrs. Ingham not only beat her about the head and face with "hard heavy" fists, but also flogged Prince's publicly exposed body on numerous occasions: "To strip me naked—to hang me up by the wrists and lay my flesh open with the cow-skin, was an ordinary punishment for even a slight offence" (56). (Years later, the adult Prince relives this experience at the hands of Mr. D—, her second master.)

According to Bush, this image of a publicly nude Prince hanging by her wrists as she was being flogged was not an uncommon sight in the British West Indies (Slave Women 42). Nor, according to Frances Anne Kemble, was such a scene unusual in the United States. For example, Die, a slave woman, attributes one of her several miscarriages to a flogging in which "her arms were strained up." When asked to explain, Die describes a collective experience:

She said *their* hands were first tied together, sometimes by the wrists, and sometimes, which was worse, by the thumbs, and *they* were then drawn up to a tree or post, so as almost to swing *them* off the ground, and then *their* clothes rolled round *their* waist, and a man with a cowhide stands and stripes *them* [italics mine]. (240-241)
Except that the 94-year-old Fannie Griffin, an exslave woman whose story is given voice in Before Freedom: 48 Oral Histories of Former North and South Carolina Slaves (1989), was dressed at the time of her flogging, Griffin recalls that "Missy Grace . . . When she go to whip me, she tie [sic] my wrists together with a rope and put that rope through a big staple in the ceiling and draw me up off the floor and give me a hundred lashes" (159). A variation of this image appears in Jubilee (1966), a thoroughly researched historical novel by Margaret Walker. Like Prince, seven-year-old Vyry is subjected to the wrath of Big Missy, her savage mistress. Although fully clothed and not flogged, Vyry is hung by her hands, with "toes barely" touching "the floor," and left in a dark closet as punishment for having broken "one of Big Missy's china dishes" (26). Big Missy's participation in Vyry's de-humanization is as aggressive as Mrs. Ingham's.

Prince's second and current mistress is the nameless, faceless and voiceless "wife" of Mr. D—, whose participation in her de-humanization is passive. Prince's mentioning of her is purely incidental: "The first person I saw, on my arrival, was Mr. D—, a stout sulky looking man, who carried me through the hall to show me to his wife and children" (61). Added to her namelessness is her facelessness (Prince offers no description of her) and her apparent voicelessness. According to Prince, the "wife" does not speak—not to Prince, not to other slaves, not to Mr. D— or young Miss D—, not to anyone. In the "ten years" (65) that Prince and others were physically abused and economically exploited on Turks Island, the "wife" silently witnessed the work-related injuries and health hazards to which the field hands in the salt ponds were subjected:

61
We... worked through the heat of the day; the sun flaming upon our heads like fire, and raising salt blisters in those parts which were not completely covered. Our feet and legs, from standing in the salt water for so many hours, soon became full of dreadful boils, which eat down in some cases to the very bone, afflicting the sufferers with great torment. (61-62)

And the illnesses and other maladies that were left unchecked:

Sick or well, it was work — work — work!... When we were ill, let our complaint be what it might, the only medicine given to us was a great bowl of hot salt water, with salt mixed with it, which made us very sick. (63)

Moreover, her silence supported extremely long work days ("we worked from morning till night," p. 62); diets lacking proper nutrition; and inadequate housing:

We slept in a long shed, divided into narrow slips, like the stalls used for cattle. Boards fixed upon stakes driven into the ground, without mat or covering, were our only beds. (62)\(^7\)

Furthermore, the silent "wife" condoned the terrorization of "Poor Daniel" (64), the malicious murder of "a little old woman among the slaves called Sarah" (65), and the awful beatings to which Prince's publicly nude body was subjected to at the hands of Mr. D— (62-63).

That, according to Prince, the "wife" never spoke out against the inhumaness of slavery, implicates her as one who condoned the attempted de-humanization of persons, such as Mary Prince. In *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (1988), Elizabeth Fox-Genovese points out that slave mistresses "overwhelmingly supported slavery and its constraints as the necessary price for their own privileged position" (243). Further, she writes that although "slaveholding women. . . emerge from their diaries
and letters as remarkably attractive people who loved their children, their husbands, their families, and their friends,” they in fact “accepted and supported the social system that endowed them with power and privilege over black women (242-243). Thus, “class and race” were essential to “slaveholding” women’s identities (39).

But though the “wife” lacks an identity, who she is not (not slave, not black) is actually the definition of who she is (Huggins, Black Odyssey lii-liii). In Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination, Toni Morrison addresses this point in greater detail:

Black slavery enriched the country’s creative possibilities. For in that construction of blackness and enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me. (38)

Fox-Genovese, Huggins, and Morrison write particularly about white men and women in the United States. But if, as Conniff and Davis postulate, it is true that Blacks “shared” (vii) the experience of New World slavery in which race/color determined their social and political status (78), then its “corollary” (McIntosh 6) must also be true: Whites (e.g., English, French, Portuguese, Spanish, and European-Americans), by virtue of their whiteness, shared the experience of New World slavery in which they were the privileged and ruling class.

Needless to say, neither the nameless, faceless and voiceless “wife,” nor the “savage” Mrs. I—modeled behavior that would have motivated Prince to rescue Miss D—from her abusive father. Both mistresses and masters and their offspring (Master Dickey, for example, who Prince describes as “the cruel son of a cruel father,” p. 65) were less than kind to Prince. Indeed the only kindnesses Prince had known since before her “twelfth year” (49) were those
shown to her by other enslaved Afro-Caribbean people. The “French black called Hetty,” for example, treated Prince with kindness:

I liked to look at her and watch all her doings, for her’s [sic] was the only friendly face I had as yet seen, and I felt glad she was there. She gave me my supper of potatoes and milk, and a blanket to sleep upon, which she spread for me in the passage before the door of Mrs. I—’s chamber. (55)

Hetty also became Prince’s family in the absence of her own: “Poor Hetty, my fellow slave, was very kind to me, I used to call her my Aunt” (57).

According to Conniff and Davis, it was not an uncommon practice for enslaved Africans, both African-born and Creole, to create families where none existed:

Even on the voyage to the Americas, Africans forged deep and occasionally enduring bonds as shipmates. The term *shipmate*, in fact, had a profoundly emotional resonance because of the danger and fear of the crossing. Once on land, Africans had to struggle to define themselves and to preserve as much as possible a sense of self. Throughout the Caribbean, slaves expanded on their shipmate linkages and established networks of relationships with one another to help meet everyday challenges and to add humanity to their lives. (79)

Evidently, creating families where there were none was a matter of survival (Blassingame 151). In *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean, 1736-1831* (1994), Michael Mullin writes that these extended families marked “the beginnings of the African-American family” (161).

The second act of kindness occurred in about 1805 (Ferguson 8), approximately five years after Prince’s father implored Capt. Ingham to imagine himself a human being. At the time Prince was about 17 years old and was once again forcefully separated from her family.
The distance this time would not be one which one could walk, but rather a “720-mile voyage” (Ferguson 8). En route, a black couple share their food with a hungry Prince:

We were nearly four weeks on the voyage, which was unusually long. Sometimes we had a light breeze, sometimes a great calm, and the ship made no way; so that our provisions and water ran very low, and we were put upon short allowance. I should almost have starved had it not been for the kindness of a black man called Anthony, and his wife, who had brought their own victuals, and shared them with me. (61)

Why then did Mary Prince defend Miss D— from Mr. D— in Grand Quay, Bermuda? The only possible explanation, the only explanation that makes sense, is that Prince had learned what it means to be a human being from other enslaved Afro-Caribbean people such as her father, Hetty, and Anthony and his wife. Why does Mary Prince speak for and on behalf of young Miss D—? The answer is simple. It was the only humane thing to do. It was what one human being should do, and ought to do, for another human being. By the same token, it was a gesture of sisterly solidarity and possibly the first such gesture in the Americas. In Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist (1987), Hazel V. Carby points out that Mary Prince “established in her narrative that certain sympathies and similarities could exist between a white woman and her black female slave” (37). Consequently, this single act establishes Mary Prince as a premier nineteenth century “womanist,” that is, one who is “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist . . . Traditionally universalist” (Walker xi). This is the reason Prince momentarily forgets her own social and political status and, with all deliberation, courageously defends her mistress. According to Pacquet, Prince acted on “principle” and,
thus, redefined herself as a socially responsible individual (African American Review 138-139).

The third time Prince resists, she speaks for herself as a young woman who is a victim of sexual abuse. Note the scene in which Mr. D—asks Prince to “wash him” while he is in the bathtub:

He had an ugly fashion of stripping himself quite naked, and ordering me then to wash him in a tub of water. This was worse to me than all the licks. Sometimes when he called me to wash him I would not come, my eyes would be so full of shame. He would them come to beat me. (67-68)

But even as she fought back—

I defended myself, for I thought that it was high time to do so [italics mine]. I then told him I would not live longer with him, for he was a very indecent man—very spiteful, and too indecent; with no shame for his servants, no shame for his own flesh. (68)

—one can only imagine that after assaulting Prince, Mr. D—did in fact rape her. By her own admission, this was not the first time. The difference, however, is that Prince does not quietly submit as she might have done on the “remote.... [and] isolated” Turks Island. The difference is that she fights back (Ferguson 11).

As if her verbal and physical resistance are not enough, Prince runs to the home of a neighbor, only to return the following day because she does not know what else to do. This would be the second time in her life that she has resisted by running away. According to Conniff and Davis, running away, even if only for a brief time—“a day or two” (62), for instance—was not unusual. They offer the following reasons for runaways like Prince who stayed away for brief periods and either returned themselves, or were returned by others:
Such slaves were designated runaways, even though they often left to protest or merely to rest, visit friends, or pursue other interests. These temporary absences sometimes followed the separation of a slave from his or her family, an unfair punishment, or an argument. (62)

The first time Prince ran away, she did so not only “to protest . . . an unfair punishment,” but also to seek protection. Her reasons for running this time are no different. She desires protection from what she believes will likely be an “unfair punishment,” and she obviously feels the need “to protest” the sexual abuse to which she is subjected. In both instances, her motivation and subsequent behavior support the findings of Conniff and Davis: “Many such people only went a short distance from their estates and hid in deserted areas or among other slaves or kin. Most returned on their own” (62-63).

That young Miss D— is silent, only highlights the fact that sisterhood between this particular mistress and her slave was unattainable. So complete is Miss D—’s socialization into the British West Indian slave culture, “in which the masters [are] white and the slaves [are] black” (Conniff and Davis 78), that she is apparently unable to imagine the possibility of sisterly solidarity between black and white women, slave and free women. Like the “wife,” Miss D— understands who and what she is because she knows who and what she is not: True, she may be “penalized” because of her “gender;” but she is certainly “privileged” because of her race (Carby 54-55; Collins 225). Needless to say, sisterhood was neither realized in theory, nor in fact in the British Caribbean. Indirectly and quite unintentionally, Eric Williams addresses this issue in his discussion of the socially acceptable white male/black female/white female triangle and the emergence of another social class.
The slave women were defenceless under the regime of slavery, and the white man’s preoccupation with his slave women, his neglect of his wife, and the tolerant attitude to concubinage were responsible for no small part of the disgraceful cruelty of white women to slave girls. (The Negro 57)

Thirty years later, the theme of sisterhood is further examined by the African American Harriet Ann Jacobs’ Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood 37). But just as sisterhood remained unrealized between Prince and Miss D—, it also remained unimagined between the fictional Linda Brent and Mrs. Flint. Clare Robertson writes that except for the “early nineteenth-century West Indian example, Mary Prince,” she “found no parallel example of cross-class, cross-race female solidarity when a mistress did the same to protect a bondwoman” (Robertson 14-15). The theme of sisterhood, however, has been revised in neo-slave narratives by black women novelists, such as Maryse Conde’, in I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem (1986), Sherley Ann Williams, in Dessa Rose (1986), and Toni Morrison, in Beloved (1987).\(^\text{18}\)

According to Jean Fagan Yellin, in The Slave’s Narrative, Jacobs also attempted “to establish an American sisterhood and to activate that sisterhood in the public arena” (276). This point is made clear in the Preface (276) and throughout Jacobs’ narrative as she appeals to a “potential” audience (Carby 51). But Carby reasons that Jacobs’ attempt was unsuccessful because “many of the relationships portrayed between Linda Brent and white women involve cruelty and betrayal,” her targeted audience was placed “in the position of having to realize their implication in the oppression of black women, prior to any actual realization of the bonds of ‘sisterhood’” (51). Needless to say, sisterhood was not realized in the United States any more than it was in the British West Indies.\(^\text{19}\)
The fourth and final time Prince resists, she does so as a mature woman who is a victim of psychological abuse. By this time in Prince’s life, she has become a chronic sufferer of rheumatism, which she believes she got “by catching cold at the pond side, from washing in fresh water,” whereas at Turks Island, she “never got cold” in the “salt water” (69). Once—before Prince married Daniel James—when she was in dire need of medical care and was unable to perform her duties as washerwoman, the Woods abandoned her. Had it not been for a concerned neighbor, Prince might have died all alone in that “little old out-house” (69).

The person who lived in next yard, (a Mrs. Greene,) could not bear to hear my cries and groans. She was kind, and used to send an old slave woman to help me, who sometimes brought me a little soup. When the doctor found I was ill, he said I must be put into a bath of hot water. The old slave got the bark of some bush that was good for pains, which she boiled in the hot water, and every night she came and put me into the bath, and did what she could for me; I don’t know what I should have done, or what would have become of me, had it not been for her. (69)

It is true that Mrs. Greene was a “kind” woman, but the person who cared for Prince and nursed her back to health was the “old slave woman.” Mrs. Wood did little:

My mistress, it is true, did send me a little food; but no one from our family [italics mine] came near me but the cook, who used to shove my food in at the door, and say, ‘Molly, Molly, there’s your dinner.’ My mistress did not care to take any trouble about me; and if the Lord had not put it into the hearts of the neighbours to be kind to me, I must, I really think, have lain and died. (69)

It is ironic that had Prince been a slave on a plantation, the Woods would have been legally compelled to “provide” her with medical care, since, according to Sheridan, “The Leeward Islands Act of 1798 . . . required every plantation to provide a . . . hospital, employ a doctor
who was obliged to call at the estate twice a week unless he was notified in writing that his presence was not required.”

Left to die once already, and twice told by the Woods to find a new master (which, with alacrity, she did—Adam White and Mr. Burchell—and even offered to purchase her own freedom), Prince ceased using language as a weapon with which to resist the psychological abuse inflicted on her by the Woods in Antigua. In England, however, she did complain because her rheumatism had gotten progressively worse: “When we drew near to England, the rheumatism seized all my limbs worse than ever, and my body was dreadfully swelled” (76). Although Mrs. Wood knew that Prince was unable to continue functioning as the family’s washing machine, she nonetheless insisted that Prince do the laundry:

... she only got into a passion as usual, and said washing in hot water could not hurt any one; — that I was lazy and insolent, and wanted to be free of my work; but that she would make me do it. I thought her very hard on me, and my heart rose up within me. However I kept still at that time, and went down again to wash the child’s things; but the English washerwomen who were at work there, when they saw that I was so ill, had pity upon me and washed them for me. (77)

With each articulated concern about her declining health, the Woods threatened Prince with homelessness: “They opened the door and bade me get out” (77); Mr. Wood “cursed and swore at me dreadfully, and said he would never sell my freedom—if I wished to be free, I was free in England, and I might go and try what freedom would do for me, and be d—d” (78); and, Mrs. Wood “said, she supposed I thought myself a free woman, but I was not; and if I did not do it directly I should be instantly turned out of doors” (77-78).
Psychologically, these scenes must have been devastating for Prince. Though she and the Woods believed Prince to be free in England, for a number of reasons Prince did not leave the Wood’s household right away. For one, she was unfamiliar with England. She knew little, if anything, about the culture, climate and people. For another, she had neither family nor friends there; and she didn’t know where to go or to whom to turn for help. But after the fourth such psychologically abusive episode (“Mr. Wood said he would send for a constable to thrust me out”), Prince once again resisted. Her motivation was the same as it had been that first time in Spanish Point, Bermuda. Indeed her words echo her first “womanish” attempt to claim her humanity in what must have seemed to her an inhumane world: “At last I took courage and resolved that I would not be longer thus treated” (78). Then she left. She went to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Mash, a “poor” couple who took her in when she had no place else to go: “I lived a good many months with these poor people, and they nursed me, and did all that lay in their power to serve me” (80). It was another act of kindness by poor people.

There can be little doubt that the History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, Related by Herself (1831) is an important text, because established in it is the cross-cultural theme of language as a weapon of empowerment in selected texts. For example, Silvia DuBois, a slave woman, admittedly sassed then struck her mistress but was not punished on condition that both she and her child leave the farm. After Sojourner Truth, an ex-slave woman who freed herself from her master by walking away, was confronted by him, she refused to return with him: “No, I wont [sic] go back with you” (29). When Frado, an indentured servant in
Harriet E. Adams Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859), responded to her mistress’s call, it was interpreted by her mistress as sass and Frado as sassy:

Too long gone. Flushed with anger, she rose and greeted her with, ‘What are you gone so long, for? Bring it in quick, I say.’

‘I am coming as quick as I can,’ she [Frado] replied, entering the door.

‘Saucy, impudent nigger, you! Is this the way you answer me?’ and taking a large carving knife from the table, she hurled it, in her rage, at the defenceless girl. (64)

The most famous example is Linda Brent, the protagonist in Harriet Ann Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). According to Joanne M. Braxton in *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition within a Tradition* (1989), the fictional Brent uses language as “a shield against Flint’s physical sexual aggression” (31). Thus, language as a weapon of resistance and self-empowerment is revised in *A Slave Girl*, and in 1937 empowerment through language acquisition becomes a theme of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937).  

Mary Prince is indeed a “pioneering figure” in African American women’s autobiographical writings (Gates, *Classic Narratives* xi). But more, she is a figure of central importance in the cultural history of the African Diaspora. One need look no further than the Million Woman March when, in her keynote address, Winnie Mandela invoked the name of Mary Prince as one of several heroic nineteenth-century black women.
Notes


2. It was not unusual for a slave to be auctioned for such a reason. The following ad, which appeared in the June 11, 1808 edition of the Royal St. Vincent Gazette, attests to this fact: “FOR SALE A STOUT, Healthy, Negro Man of the Ebo Nation, well seasoned to the Island, and sold for no fault, but that the owner is in want of cash. For further particulars, enquire [sic] of Mr. Thomas O’Flaherty” (184). See Shyllon, Caribbean Studies 177-199.

3. That Prince and others refer to Hetty as the “French Black,” suggests that Hetty was ethnically different, which is to say, she was a French West Indian slave and probably spoke a French West Indian dialect mixed with some English words.

4. To my knowledge, there were no laws such as this in the United States. To protect the life of the master’s yet-to-be-born wealth, pregnant women on southern plantations were instructed to lie down on the ground and to place their stomachs in a hole: “A woman who gives offense in the field, and is large in a family way, is compelled to lie down over a hole made to receive her corpulence, and is flogged with the whip or beat with a paddle. . . .”; E. Franklin Frazier, The Negro Family in the United States (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1969) 18, qtd. in Davis, “The Legacy of Slavery: Standards for a New Womanhood,” Women, Race & Class (New York: Vintage, 1983) 9.


6. Since, according to David W. Blight, Douglass’s racial ancestry included Native American, “which came from his grandmother’s family,” Douglass was actually multi-racial. See Blight’s introductory essay, titled “A Psalm of Freedom,” in Narrative of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s P, 1993) 3.

8. Other examples of African American bi-racial slaves, who were categorized as Blacks, may be found in oral histories. Tines Kendricks of Georgia relates that his mother’s father “was a white man [her] overseer” in Lay My Burden Down; A Folk History of Slavery, ed. B. A. Botkin (1945; New York: Delta, 1994) 82. Belinda Hurmence includes the following recollection of W. L. Bost, an 87-year-old ex-slave residing in Asheville, North Carolina: “Plenty of colored women have children by the white men. She know better than to not do what he say. Didn’t have much of that until the men from South Carolina come up here and settle and bring slaves. Then they take them very same children what have they own blood and make slaves out of them. If the missus find out, she raise revolution”; see Before Freedom: 48 Oral Histories of Former North and South Carolina Slaves (New York: Mentor, 1990) 82. Likewise, Frances Anne Kemble relates the stories of other slave women whose mulatto children inherited their social status. Betty, the “wife of headman Frank,” had given birth to a son by Mr. King (176). Judy’s “first-born” was the son of Mr. King. He “forced” her, then “flogged . . . [her] severely” because she resisted his sexual aggressiveness (238). Within a month, two women, Judy and Scylla, had given birth; Mr. King was the father of their children; Mrs. King had both women flogged (269). Sophy, who had been “forced” by Morris, the driver, had a son, Isaac (270). The father of Tema’s child was Temple, the bricklayer (270).


classifications of black, white, and mixed, except for states such as Louisiana, only two categories were adopted in the United States. Jones points out that had whites in the United States acknowledged the non-absoluteness of their own whiteness, and blackness as well, that they would have had to re-examine pre-existing ideas “about the humanity of non-white peoples.” See “Nigger and Knowledge: White Double-Consciousness in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,” Mark Twain Journal 22:2 (Fall 1984): 28-37. In systems consisting of three or more racial classifications, it is as likely that this same kind of re-examination of pre-existing ideas about who is and is not humane would have to take place.


14. Actually the particulars of Jack’s enslavement are not unusual. With few exceptions, his story could be the collective story of other captured African boys and girls in the Americas. In the self-authored A Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince, Written by Herself (1853), Prince writes that her maternal grandfather and her mother’s second husband were “African-born” slaves: “My mother was born in Gloucester, Massachusetts—the daughter of Tobias Wornton, or Backus, so called. He was stolen from Africa, when a lad, and was a slave of Captain Winthrop Sargeant... My grandmother was an Indian of this country; she became a captive to the English, or their descendants. She served as a domestic in the Parsons home. My father, Thomas Gardner, was born in Nantucket; his parents were of African descent... My stepfather was stolen from Africa. ... He was called ‘Money Vose’...” (5). See Collected Black Women’s Narratives, gen. ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Oxford UP, 1988). In the dictated narrative, The Story of Mattie L. Jackson, a True Story, as Given by Mattie (1866), Jackson relates the
following about her African ancestry: “By all accounts my great grandfather was captured and brought from Africa. His original name I never learned. His master’s name was Jackson, and he resided in the State of New York” (5); see *Six Women’s Slave Narratives*, gen. ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Oxford UP, 1988). Parker Pool, a 91-year-old Wake County resident, recalls that his great grandfather, “Buck... was right out of Africa”; *Before Freedom: 48 Oral Histories of Former North Carolina and South Carolina Slaves*, ed. Belinda Hurmence (New York: Mentor, 1990) 70. Eleanor Eldridge’s “paternal grandfather was a native African.” He and his entire family were kidnapped when he was a child in west Africa; see “Eleanor Eldridge,” *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life*, 78-79. As for captured African girls, 103-year-old Ann Parker of Raleigh, North Carolina, says: “I ain’t had no daddy, ‘cause queens don’t marry, and my mammy, Junny, was a queen in Africa. They kidnaps her and steals her away from her throne and fetches her here to Wake County in slavery” (1). Eighty-four-year-old Hannah Crasson, also of Raleigh, relates that her “great grandmother was named Granny Flora. They stole her from Africa with a red picket handkerchief” (15). See *My Folks Don’t Want Me To Talk About Slavery*, ed. Belinda Hurmence, fourth printing (Winston-Salem, North Carolina: John F. Blair, 1990).

15. With the spread of Islam into north and west Africa, a slave system evolved in Africa. One could become a slave in a number of ways; e.g., by being a prisoner of war or a victim of a kidnapping, by committing a crime such as kidnapping, by being a female adulterer, by not repaying one’s debts, and by defiling someone’s religious/sacred objects/icons. Children, as well, might find themselves slaves, especially during times of “famine.” See Franklin and Moss 18; Blassingame 6; *Africa*, eds. Phyllis M. Martin and Patrick O’Meara, second edition (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986) 89; Claire Robertson, *More Than Chattel* 7; and John R. Spears, “On the Slave-Coast,” *The American Slave-Trade* (1907; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970) 47-48. Lucy Terry Prince, first Black poet in the Americas, is believed to have been born in Africa and enslaved there prior to her enslavement in the United States (Hine 945). A distinction needs to made, however, between African slavery, which did not deny the individual’s humanity, and that which was practiced in the Americas, which did in fact attempt to de-humanize human beings. Equiano, self-conscious writer that he was, makes this point clear in his autobiography; see *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*, 182. So too does Alex Haley in the fictionalized narrative of his eighteenth century ancestor, Kunta Kinte, in *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1976) 51-55, 137.

16. For much of Walker’s life, she wrote and researched *Jubilee*. Actual writing began when she was a senior at Northwestern University in 1934. A few years later, she began her research while enrolled in a master’s program at the University of Iowa, and in 1944, she writes that her “serious research” began when she received a Rosenwald Fellowship. Ten years later, Walker received a Ford Fellowship, which enabled her to complete her research, and became a Yale Fellow. In 1962, she returned to the University of Iowa, this time to pursue a doctorate in English with *Jubilee* as her dissertation. By 1965, Walker completed the first draft of *Jubilee*, and one year later, her historical novel was published. See “How I

17. Barbara Bush’s findings support Prince’s description of a typical day in the life of a fieldhand: “In crop time (four to six months between October and March) slaves were turned out of their quarters at sun-up and worked till sunset. . . . There was also extended night-work during this period. . . . between 1807 and 1832 a typical day worked by field workers was twelve hours in Jamaica and ten hours in the eastern Caribbean. . . . Field workers were treated as the capital stock of the plantation. . . . They suffered from greater ill-health and higher mortality rates”; see Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838 (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990) 38.


20. Kemble also writes about her observations of slave women in the United States who, because of labor, exposure and little/no knowledge about the disease and virtually no medical care, suffered with chronic rheumatism: “Charlotte, Renty’s wife . . . was almost crippled with rheumatism” (230); Judy . . . complained of chronic rheumatism. . . . She could hardly crawl” (238); “Mile, who could hardly stand for pain and swelling in her limbs . . . had become almost a cripple with chronic rheumatism” (240); “Venus. . . . was terribly crippled
with rheumatism" (245); “one of the thousand ‘Mollies’ on the estate... came to ask me for some flannel for her legs, which were all swollen with constant rheumatism” (245-46); and “old Dorcas, one of the most decrepit, rheumatic, and miserable old Negresses” (302).


CHAPTER 4

WHEN AND WHERE MARY PRINCE ENTERS . . .

AND THE

AFRICAN AMERICAN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL TRADITION

Only the BLACK WOMAN can say ‘when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me’ [italics mine].

— Anna Julia Cooper, “Womanhood a Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress Of a Race,” A Voice from the South

Except for narratives written by African and African American males, Mary Prince had no models by which to “enrich and enlarge” her own “view of existence” as an Afro-Caribbean slave woman (Walker 4). Still, she managed to situate herself within a traditionally and historically male-centered canon that has since come to be known as the African American autobiographical tradition. The most famous of these male autobiographers is Frederick Douglass, whose 1845 autobiography was “a remarkable literary achievement” (Stepto 17).
In its day, Douglass’s narrative was a best selling autobiography both in the United States and abroad.² It was a tremendous success because, as Deborah McDowell (1993) says, Douglass, more than any other ex-slave, made the slave experience “intelligible” (39). Although Douglass did not keep a personal copy of the international bestseller The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself (1789) in his library, scholars such as Houston A. Baker, Jr. (1984) and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1987), argue that Equiano’s autobiography facilitated Douglass’s intellectualization of the slave experience and thus the success of An American Slave.³

In Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory (1984), for instance, Baker defines Douglass’s autobiography as an “already said” text because of “certain recurrent, discursive patterns” (39). For example, Douglass’s comment about “Aunt Hester’s fate” and Douglass’s helplessness was “already said” by Equiano:

Douglass reports: ‘I was so terrified and horror-stricken at the sight, that I hid myself in a closet, and dared not venture out. . . .’ Vassa’s words—‘I was . . . obliged to submit at all times . . . being unable to help them [African women sexually assaulted by white ship’s hands]’—echo through Douglass’s report. (40)

Other examples include “the disruption of black familial relations signaled by the narrator’s [Douglass’s] separation from his mother is equivalent to Vassa’s kidnapping and severance from his sister” (39); and Douglass’s and Equiano’s experiences as urban slaves and subsequent interactions with “kindly, white womanhood. . . . [who] offer relationships for Vassa and Douglass that satisfy the slaves’ needs for emotional affiliation and intellectual advancement” (42).
Likewise, in the introduction in The Classic Slave Narratives, Gates posits “that the 1789 slave narrative of Olaudah Equiano was his [Douglass’s] ‘silent second text’” (xiv). He writes:

What great slave narrative informed Douglass’s? Although it is obvious that Douglass read widely, and avidly devoured those narratives published by other ex-slaves between 1831 and 1845, was he revising another classic slave narrative, one whose form and themes he could appropriate and ‘rewrite’ in that profound art of grounding that creates a literary tradition? (xiii)

Gates’s response to his question is that Equiano’s autobiography was that other “classic slave narrative.” But also implied in this singularly important question is that other narratives also informed Douglass, one of which might very well have been The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, Related by Herself (1831). Indeed the implication of such a provocative question makes Ferguson’s observation an all the more compelling issue: “Those [slave narratives] from the nineteenth-century United States, for example, followed a certain development, aspects of which roughly resembled aspects in Prince’s narrative” (23).

What Ferguson refers to as “a certain development, aspects” are actually the conventions of slave narratives, which James Olney (1985) defines as the “Master Plan for Slave Narratives” (Slave’s Narrative 152-153). Although Olney’s model is Douglass’s autobiography, many of these conventions, as Ferguson points out, were present in Prince’s unique autobiography, which resembled eighteenth-century British narratives, nineteenth-century African American narratives, and “recorded court cases” of British female slave abuse as reported in the Anti-Slavery Reporter (24). In the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss
the narratives of Equiano and Prince as prototypes for what Douglass does fourteen years later.

**FRONT-MATTER**

The conventional page "that includes the claim as an integral part of the title, ‘Written by Himself’ (or some close variant: ‘Written from a statement of Facts Made by Himself’; or ‘Written by a Friend, as Related to Him by Brother Jones’; etc) ” (Olney 152), appears in The African, A West Indian Slave, and An American Slave. In each instance, the “claim” functions as both an authenticating and political device.

Equiano’s “title” page reads as follows:

THE

INTERESTING NARRATIVE

OF

THE LIFE

OF

OLAUDAH EQUIANO,

OR

GUSTAVUS VASSA,

THE AFRICAN.

WRITTEN BY HIMSELF.⁴

As an authenticating device, the “claim”—"Written by Himself"—corroborates the "subjective" (Olney 154): The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or
Gustavus Vassa. In other words, what the reader can expect is the personal story of an individual with two identities, two names. He is known by the African name, Olaudah Equiano, and the European name, Gustavus Vassa. His dual identity serves two purposes: (1) it is indicative of a “bicural perspective” of the New World slave experience (Andrews, *Free Story* 57-60); and (2) it foreshadows the DuBoisian concept of “double-consciousness,” i.e., “of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.”

Second, the “claim” corroborates the “objective reality” (Olney 154), which is to say that Equiano’s personal story (kidnapping, the Middle Passage, and identity) could be the story of any “African-born” slave (Conniff and Davis 79). Examples include James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw (Edwards, *The Slave’s Narrative* 177) and John Stuart, also known as Quobna Ottobah Cugoano (Gates, *Signifying Monkey* 144). In *Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature* (1973), Olney asserts that this “commonality of existence” is present in black first-person narratives such as Camara Laye’s *The Dark Child* (1954) and Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* (1945). “The similarity,” he writes, “turns on the commonality of experience and the consequent representativeness of the author’s voice” (57). Likewise, in the preface to *Current Writing: Text and Reception in South Africa*, J. U. Jacobs writes that “black autobiographers stress the representativeness of their experiences,” that “the value of the individual life story lies not in its uniqueness but in the fact of its unexceptionality” (9).

As a political device, Equiano’s “claim” de-mythologizes the presumed intellectual inferiority of people of African descent. The Western concept of literacy as the measure of one’s humanity is a point that Gates argues in the introductory essays to *The Slave’s Narrative* (1985) and “Race,” *Writing and Difference* (1986). In the former, he explains that
black autobiography "arose as a response to and refutation of claims that blacks could not write" (xv). In the latter, he cites the example of "African-born" Phillis Wheatley, an eighteenth century poet and founder of both the African American literary tradition and the African American women's literary tradition, and comments that "reviews of Wheatley's book argued that the publication of her poems meant that the African was indeed a human being and should not be enslaved" (8-9). For Equiano to identify himself as "The African" and "Writer" of his own story was essentially to proclaim himself a "human being" in "Western letters" (Gates, Signifying Monkey 131).

Formally, Mary Prince's title page is a rewriting of Equiano's:

THE

HISTORY OF MARY PRINCE,

A WEST INDIAN SLAVE.

RELATED BY HERSELF.6

The "claim" continues to function as an authenticating and political device. But since Prince's is the story of a "Creole," or a person of African ancestry born in the British Caribbean, her story must address a new reality.

As an authenticating device, the "claim" corroborates the "titular" theme (Olney, Slave's Narrative 156), i.e., the personal story of Mary Prince, an ex-slave woman who reclaims her name. Though it is not an African name, but rather, one that signifies her birth as a non-free person of African descent in the Americas, this act of reclamation is important for two reasons. First, it is a self-defining moment for Prince as a free woman and a statement about self-authorized power (Smith 90). Second, the problem of naming which was first
problematized on Equiano’s title page and resolved on Prince’s, becomes a recurring motif in subsequent African American autobiography. The ex-slave Frederick Douglass is of course the most famous example. Douglass’s self-naming, according to Olney, symbolizes his “new social identity” as a free man (157). Other examples include Isabella Von Wagener who is self-named Sojourner Truth. The slave woman Betty Veney, also known as Bethenea and Aunt Betty, signs the last page of her narrative “Bethany Veney.” Malcolm Little, re-named Malcolm X by Elijah Muhammad (199), becomes El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (342). Finally, the name of the protagonist in Maya Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1970) is Margaret, not Mary (90-93). Likewise, naming is a theme of African American literature: Ralph Ellison’s un-named Invisible Man (1952) finally “assumes responsibility for naming himself” (Smith 91); and by the novel’s end, Dessa, the protagonist in Sherley Ann Williams’s Dessa Rose (1986), is finally called by her rightful name (256).

Prince’s “claim” also corroborates the “sub-titular” theme (Olney 156), which is to say, the “objective reality” (154). In Baker’s analysis of Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, he points out that “the appearance of the indefinite article ‘a’ . . . implies that this relationship is defining in the life of any slave” girl (Blues 52). The same may be argued for Prince’s A West Indian Slave. In other words, Mary Prince’s individual story could in fact be the story of any Afro-Caribbean slave woman in the British West Indies (Pacquet 142). Thus, the “sub-titular” theme signals the narrative’s representativeness, a characteristic of black autobiography that Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argues in “My Statue, My Self: Autobiographical Writings of Afro-American Women”.11
In their representations of a specific life, the autobiographical writings of many black women, like those of many black men, do bear witness to a collective experience—to black powers of survival and creativity as well as to white oppression. (184)

Selwyn R. Cudjoel concurs:

. . . The autobiographical subject thus emerges as an almost capricious member of the group, selected to tell his or her story and to explain the condition of the group rather than to assuage his or her egoistical concerns. As a consequence, the autobiographical statement emerges as a public rather than a private gesture, me-ism gives way to our-ism and superficial concerns with the individual subject (individualism) give way to the collective subjection of the group. . . . The autobiography, then, is meant to serve the group rather than to glorify the individual’s exploits. The concerns of the collective predominate and one’s personal experiences are presumed to be the closest approximation of the group’s experiences. (280)

Thus, revised in Prince’s first-person narrative is the “sub-titular” theme of “representativeness.”

Furthermore, Prince’s “claim”— “Related by Herself”—renders her narrative an “as told to” story. Her “claim” is nonetheless political, as is Malcolm X’s. Like Prince, who dictated her story, Malcolm X related his lived experience to Alex Haley; hence, the title:

The Autobiography of Malcolm X As Told to Alex Haley [italics mine].

Formally, Douglass’s title page is a rewriting of The African and A West Indian Slave.
NARRATIVE

OF THE

LIFE

OF

FREDERICK DOUGLASS,

AN

AMERICAN SLAVE.

WRITTEN BY HIMSELF.¹³

As an authenticating device, the “claim”—”Written by Himself”—functions on two levels. On the one hand, it corroborates the “subjective”; on the other, the “claim” corroborates the “objective reality.” According to Gates, An American Slave is as an autobiography that “stands for the whole, for the collective black slave community” (Classic Slave xiii). James Olney (1985), Houston A. Baker, Jr. (1987), and David W. Blight (1993) concur.¹⁴ Valerie Smith, however, points out that Douglass’s autobiography “does not adequately accommodate differences in male and female development” (33). Consequently, the “objective reality” that is corroborated by Douglass’s “claim” is not only his story but could also be the story of any African American man born into slavery in the United States.

As a political device, the “claim” revises the traditionally male-centered theme of literacy, that is, the means by which an enslaved man of African descent “first proclaimed himself a human being” in the Western world.¹⁵ According to Gates, in The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism (1988), in addition to The African, the following diaspora narratives comprise this canon: A Narrative of the Most
Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, As Related by Himself (1770); The Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, A Black (1785); and Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery (1787) by John Stuart, also known as Quobna Ottobah Cugoano. With Douglass's "claim" of self-authorship, he situates himself within this tradition of literacy and the simultaneous proclamation of himself "a human being." Twentieth century African American and African autobiographies that adhere to this tradition include Booker T. Washington, Up from Slavery (1901); Richard Wright, Black Boy (1945); The Autobiography of Malcolm X As Told to Alex Haley (1965); and Mark Mathabane, Kaffir Boy: The True Story of a Black Youth's Coming of Age in Apartheid South Africa (1986). But with the recent inclusion of African American and African women, the canonicity of male-centeredness has been redefined: Harriet Ann Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861); Maya Angelou, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1970); and Mariama Ba, So Long a Letter (1981).

THE NARRATIVE

According to Olney's "Master Plan," because the existence of the slave narrator and the authenticity of his/her story will be continuously questioned, claims, in addition to authorship (e.g., "Written by Himself," Related by Herself," etc.), are required (155). Consequently, another attestation is the conventional "first sentence beginning, 'I was born . . . ,'
then specifying a place but not a date of birth" (153). This additional claim of existence and authenticity—"'I exist. . . . I was born'" (155)—is present in The African, A West Indian Slave, and An American Slave. But with the displacement of the African-born
Equiano in the Americas, the “existential claim” (Olney 155) undergoes radical change as it is revised by the Afro-Caribbean Mary Prince and African American Frederick Douglass. Their challenge is to define what it means to be born a slave in the Americas.

Mary Prince’s “existential claim,” for example, is a complete revision of Equiano’s.

I was born at Brackish-Pond, in Bermuda, on a farm belonging to Mr. Charles Myners. My mother was a household [sic] slave; and my father, whose name was Prince, was a sawyer belonging to Mr. Trimtingham, a ship-builder at Crow-Lane. (47)

Whereas Equiano’s chapter-long “claim” is his intentional representation of himself as “the historical man” (Ogude 725) in particular and all Africans in general, Prince’s two-sentence “claim” lacks what Paulo Freire calls “contextual reality” (95). He explains this concept as follows:

When men [and women] lack a critical understanding of their reality, apprehending it in fragments which they do not perceive as interacting constituent elements of the whole, they cannot truly know that reality. To truly know it, they would have to reverse their starting point: they would need to have a total vision of the context in order subsequently to separate and isolate its constituent elements and by means of this analysis achieve a clearer perception of the whole. (94-95)

According to Freire’s model of “thematic investigation” (95), in order for Prince’s analysis to assume “contextual reality,” it would need to demonstrate her awareness of herself as one element “interacting” as “constituent elements of the whole.” In other words, Prince would need to recognize herself as one British West Indian slave woman together with other slave men and women in the British West Indies. Implicitly, the title of Prince’s narrative functions on these two levels, i.e., the objective and subjective. But in order for her “existential
claim” to assume “contextual reality,” Prince must explicitly articulate critical responses to equally critical inquiries.

For example, since Prince has no apparent knowledge of her “date of birth,” how are the facts of her birth similar to or different from others like herself who were born into British West Indian slavery? Do other British West Indian slave men and women know their birth dates? Additionally, Prince can only provide “a sketchy account of parentage” (Olney 153): Do other British West Indian slave men and women know their familiar histories? Is Prince’s lack of information unique, or is it representative? What, in fact, does it mean to be born a slave in the British West Indies? But one might argue that that Prince’s “existential claim” lacks “a critical understanding” of the slave culture into which she was born, is in fact representative and symbolic of other men and women born into slavery in the British West Indies.

Frederick Douglass, on the other hand, contextualizes his “existential claim” and thus demonstrates a “critical understanding” of the significance of his birth, his incomplete personal history, and subsequent slave status in the United States. His accomplishment may be explained in two ways. First, Douglass had “authorial control” (Stepto 16), and Prince did not. Second, lacking models by which to “enrich and enlarge” her own “view of existence,” Mary Prince had to become her own model and subject (Walker 4, 8). Assuming she had access to Equiano’s *The African*, she does not model his “existential claim” because Equiano’s experience was different: He was an African male born free to free-born African parents in West Africa in 1745. He was born into a culture that affirmed his humanity, a culture that,
for the most part, responded positively to what it means to be a human being interacting with other human beings (1-14).

Nor do the other fourteen antedating narratives provide models for Prince. Seven were self-authored or dictated by African male slaves, and the remaining seven by African American male slaves (Davis and Gates 319-321). None were penned or “related” by Afro-Caribbean men or women in the British, French or Spanish West Indies. But more importantly, Mary Prince did not have the advantage of “formal education nor contemplative leisure” (Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood 47-48).

Douglass, however, was a self-taught man who, as his library attests, “read widely.” He writes:

I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot County, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. (39)

That he does not have access to this particular information, like Prince, is symbolic of the millions of enslaved African American male and female slaves who not only inherited slave status but also vague and incomplete personal histories:

By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom come near to it than planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-time. (39)

In Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery (1945), an un-named ex-slave, relates a similar account of his personal history: “I know my mama told me years ago that I was born in watermelon time. She said she ate the first watermelon that got ripe on the place
that year, and it made her sick. She thought she had colic. Said she went and ate a piece of calamus root for the pain and after eating the root for the pain, I was born” (71). Hence, “harvest-time” is the time of year when this man, who survived slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction, celebrates his birth. Although he does not know his exact birth date, he informs the interviewer that he “will be eighty this year. I was a boy at surrender about the age of fourteen or fifteen” [italics mine] (71-72). Likewise, Millie Evans, a North Carolinian and former slave, recalls that at surrender, she was a young lady: “Was born in 1849, but I don’t know just when. My birthday comes in fodder-pulling time ‘cause my ma said she was pulling up till ‘bout a hour ‘fore I was born. Was born in North Carolina and was a young lady at the time of surrender” (Botkin 73).19

In similar fashion, Douglass approximates his age:

The nearest estimate I can give makes me now between twenty-seven and twenty-eight years of age. I come to this, from hearing my master say, some time during 1835, I was about seventeen years old [italics mine]. (39)

Eighteen hundred and thirty-five was a memorable year, one that Douglass’s master would not have forgotten because it was the year that Douglass’s escape attempt was betrayed. Auld would have remembered this particular year because it was a matter of economics, since Douglass’s marketability as a slave for hire would have been diminished by this single act of resistance (Huggins, Slave and Citizen 11). Consequently, 1835 was a memorable year for Auld and becomes a point of reference for Douglass, just as “surrender” becomes a marker of time for the age of the un-named ex-slave. That Douglass approximates his age is representative of countless slave men and women of African descent who did the same, for
example, Tines Kendricks of Georgia and Mariah Robinson of Georgia and Texas, respectively (Botkin 81, 88); Simuel Riddick and Ria Sorrell of Raleigh, North Carolina and Betty Cofer of Wachovia, North Carolina; and, Sam Polite of Beaufort County, South Carolina and Sylvia Cannon of Florence, South Carolina.

I should mention that Prince approximates her age also. Both points of reference are forced separations from her family. The first time, like Douglass (40), she was "an infant" (47). But this point of reference is no more a marker for time for Prince than Douglass's is for him. The second point of reference was when Prince was an adolescent.

I had scarcely reached my twelfth year when my mistress became too poor to keep so many of us at home; and she hired me out to Mrs. Pruden, a lady who lived about five miles off... I cried bitterly... But there was no help; I was forced to go. (48)

This second reference is not a marker for time either. Rather, it is a transitional device that advances the narrative movement from unawareness to consciousness, from innocence to experience. This transitional device could actually be interpreted as a motif of a non-traditional bildungsroman (Smith 33) in which Prince's growth is not from darkness to light or blindness to sight, but rather the opposite. She grows deeper and deeper into darkness and blindness.

Olney also defines the slave narrator's "sketchy account of parentage" (153) as a convention of slave narratives in his "Master Plan." This is evident in both A West Indian Slave and An American Slave. Prince's "parentage" consists of her immediate family and is exclusive of kinship ties (47). It is likely that this is yet another example of a "silent space" in Prince's narrative since, in the Americas, slaves redefined the concept of family (Conniff and
Davis 79; Mullin 161). Thus this gap may be attributed to editorial tampering, Prince’s lack of authorial control, or her deliberate withholding of information.

Douglass’s “parentage,” on the other hand, not only consists of his mother and an unnamed father but also an extended family:

My mother was named Harriet Bailey. She was the daughter of Isaac and Betsey Bailey, both colored, and quite dark. My mother was of a darker complexion than either my grandmother or grandfather.

My father was a white man. He was admitted to be such by all I ever heard speak of my parentage. The opinion was also whispered that my master was my father; but of the correctness of this opinion, I know nothing. . . . (39-40)

In this aspect, An American Slave resembles The African. Whereas the presence of Equiano’s dead maternal grandmother connotes continuity, Douglass’s live maternal grandparents denote the same. Parenthetically, Jacobs is quite the exceptional slave because she has knowledge of her parents, brother, aunts, uncles, maternal and paternal grandparents, and her maternal great-grandparents as well (5-6, 12, 17).

With Douglass’s self-defined dual racial identity, the theme of New World bi-racialism is re-introduced. Using himself as subject, Douglass examines bi-racialism within the context of the southern United States (40), as do William Wells Brown (27), Ellen Craft,22 Louisa Picquet (6, 8, 19, 23, 25), and Harriet Jacobs (5). This concept, however, was first problematized in The African. Equiano sets forth the problem of race/color and the quasi-free status of persons of African descent in the British Caribbean through Joseph Clipson, a “free young mulatto man” who was kidnapped and sold into slavery (82-83). It received further treatment in A West Indian Slave. First, through the character of Cyrus, “a mulatto” slave

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who inherited enslavement as his birthright, Prince interrogates the New World problem of color. Second, by intersecting color and class, Prince complicates the concept of bi-racialism by introducing intra-racial prejudice through the character of Martha Wilcox (69-70). Intra-racial prejudice receives further interrogation by a number of African American writers, including Zora Neale Hurston who, through the character of Mrs. Turner (207-217), re-examines class and color consciousness in Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937).

Other standard narrative conventions from Olney's "Master Plan" are also present in Prince's autobiography. For example, there are several descriptions of cruel masters and mistresses (54-78); detailed observations of whippings, the first of which is a female (55-57, 56, 64-65); there is description of a typical day in the life of a slave, including food rations (61-62), the work required of slaves (61-63), the duration of the work day (62); and attention is given to the forced separation of slave families (52-53).

The last defined narrative convention is the slave narrator's "final reflection on slavery" (153). In the case of Prince and Douglass, this "reflection" appears in the last paragraph. At an anti-slavery convention in Nantucket, Connecticut, Frederick Douglass, the fugitive slave, positions himself as the representative spokesperson for the race. He assumes the podium and tells his story, which is in fact a collective story.

My name is Frederick Douglass. . . . 'I was born’ an American slave . . . I do not know my birth date . . . I cannot give a full account of my personal history. . . . the first 'whipping' I observed was that of Aunt Hester . . . Captain Anthony stripped her, suspended her from the ceiling so that her feet did not touch the floor, then flogged her. . . . I recall cruel masters . . . . I witnessed the destruction of families, my own. . . . I worked from sun-up to sundown. . . . 'I resolved' to free myself. . . .
Fourteen years earlier, Mary Prince not only positioned herself as representative, but also proclaimed that the spokesperson for the race could also be woman and black. In her own words, she says:

All slaves want to be free — to be free is very sweet. I will say the truth to 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 — and I know what slaves feel — I can tell by myself what other slaves feel, and by what they have told me. The man that says slaves be quite happy in slavery — that they don’t want to be free — that man is either ignorant or a lying person. (84)

Having publicly spoken these words, Prince at once establishes herself as a model of womanism, i.e., “a woman who [is]. . . . Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (Walker xi). With these words, she foreshadows the nineteenth century “prototypical black feminist” scholar Anna Julia Cooper23 who, in A Voice from the South Written by a Woman from the South (1892), wrote: “Only the BLACK WOMAN can say ‘when and where’ I enter . . . then and there the whole Negro race enters with me.”

Even though Douglass kept neither A West Indian Slave nor The African in his personal library, Prince’s narrative might well be considered as much a prototype for Douglass’s “remarkable literary achievement” as is Equiano’s. There can be little doubt that Douglass was well-read and, regarding slavery in the Americas, he was fully aware of ethnic/racial, class and gender differences. His library holdings attest to this fact.24 And given the fact that Douglass was an abolitionist and a spokesman for this cause, it would not have been unlikely for Douglass to have had access to accounts of slavery by African American ex-slaves (e.g., Briton Hammon, John Marrant, Joseph Mountain, Solomon Bayley, William Grimes, and Robert Voorhis), African-born ex-slaves (James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw,
John Stuart/Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, and Olaudah Equiano), and even the Afro-Caribbean
Mary Prince as well as those of other abused slave women as reported in the British Anti-
Slavery Reporter. It is in fact likely that Douglass would have been exposed to these and other
ethnic literatures of the African Diaspora. According to the inventory of Douglass’s library,
he knew of an enslaved Cuban poet.²⁵ Hence, it is not unreasonable to speculate that Prince
was as much a foremother in the African American autobiographical tradition as was Equiano
a forefather (Andrews, Free Story 56). But Prince’s influence does not stop with the above
explained conventions, because present in subsequent nineteenth-century African American
autobiography are “aspects” (e.g., archetypes, scenes, images, recurrent language patterns, and
themes) which resemble A West Indian Slave.

1) There are two archetypal old and useless slaves in A West Indian Slave: “old
Daniel” (64) and an “old woman . . . called Sarah” (65). In An American Slave, this stock
class character is Douglass’s grandmother (65-66), and in A Slave Girl (1861), it is the protagonist’s
grandmother (11-12), an old woman (16), and an old man (93).

2) There is the scene in which the slave, who desires protection, temporarily runs
away. Mary Prince runs from Captain I— to her mother (60). Frederick Douglass runs from
Mr. Covey, the “nigger-breaker” (71), to Master Thomas Auld (76-77). Bethany Veney runs
from Master David Kibbler, “a Dutchman,—a man of most violent temper” (11), to “old
Kibbler,” her master’s father (12-13).

3) There is the image of black women’s publicly exposed bodies. In A West Indian
Slave, it is the body of Hetty at the hands of Captain I— (57) and Prince at the hands of Mr.
D— (62-63). In An American Slave, it is Aunt Hester at the hands of Captain Anthony (42-
43), and in Louisa Picquet, it is Louisa at the hands of Mr. Bachelor (14-15). In Gerima’s Sankofa, it is Shola at the hands of Joe, the mulatto slave; Father Rafael, the Catholic priest; and the master.

4) There are certain recurrent language patterns which signal the enslaved person’s psychological realization of freedom. In the years prior to Equiano’s acquisition of his freedom by purchasing his body, he says: “Notwithstanding, I was resolved to have fortitude, thinking no lot or trial is too hard when kind Heaven is the rewarder” (86). In the moments preceding Prince’s claim to freedom by walking away, she says: “. . . and at last I took courage and resolved that I would no longer thus be treated, but would go and trust to Providence” (78). In the seconds prior to Douglass’s decision to physically fight Mr. Covey, and the subsequent freeing of himself by running away, he says: “. . . at this moment—from whence came the spirit I don’t know—I resolved to fight” (78).

The table on the following page illustrates other recurring language patterns, for example, a title which denotes race, class, and gender. In A West Indian Slave and An American Slave, captain was such a title. Another pattern regards the concept of family, which is to say, symbolic and literal kinship ties. For instance, just as Douglass’s Aunt Hester is his extended family (Huggins, Slave and Citizen 4), Hetty becomes an extension of Prince’s family (though she is not) with Prince’s reference to Hetty as “Aunt.” By the same token, with the slave community’s acknowledgment of Vyry’s mother as Sis, in Jubilee, Hetta embodies the redefined family. Additionally, the slave women who represent the narrator’s “first observed whipping” (Olney 153) have similar names. In A West Indian Slave, her name is Hetty. In An American Slave, her name is Hester. What is striking about these names is
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<th>A West Indian Slave</th>
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<th>Jubilee</th>
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<tr>
<td>Titles</td>
<td>Captain I—</td>
<td>Captain Anthony</td>
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<td>Kinship ties</td>
<td>Aunt Hetty</td>
<td>Aunt Hester</td>
<td>Sis Hetta</td>
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<td>Naming</td>
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Table 4.1 Recurrent language patterns with regard to titles that denote race, class, and gender; New World family constructs and biological kinship ties; and naming patterns for women who represent the slave narrator's first observation of physical abuse.
that they could possibly be variations of the same name, particularly because of the repetition of the initial sound *He*.

5) Furthermore, there is the gender-specific reward of freedom. Male ex-slaves, such as Olaudah Equiano and Frederick Douglass, could and did have both freedom and marriage. According to Paul Edwards’ Introduction in *Equiano’s Travels* (1967), Equiano married an English woman by the name of “Miss Susan or Susanna Cullen” on April 7, 1792 (xii). Prior to choosing the name Douglass for himself, Douglass met and married Anna Murray, an older andfree born woman. They were married on September 15, 1839 by Reverend James W. C. Pennington.26 Prince and her African American counterpart, Harriet Ann Jacobs, apparently could not have both. In *A West Indian Slave*, Prince must choose between marriage and freedom: “I still live in the hope that God will find a way to give me my liberty, and give me back to my husband” (83). In *A Slave Girl*, the protagonist Linda Brent, although free, remains unmarried: “Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage” (201).

But aside from this obvious and important difference in the lives of these particular ex-slave men and women, Prince’s political and moral dilemma (re-enslavement and marriage or freedom and aloneness in a foreign country) foregrounds other equally distressing choices made by slave women who loved black men. Thus, established in her narrative is not only the theme of love between slave women and black men (slave men and free men) but also the moral dilemmas that oftentimes accompanied such love. For example, by way of anecdote, we learn that Aunt Hester loves the slave man called Ned Roberts (42) and of her dilemma: Either she could love the man of her choosing and risk severe punishment, or she could become the
reluctant concubine of her master (42-43). Because of a silent space in Douglass's 1845 autobiography (Blight 19), we do not learn how she resolved her dilemma. In Celia, a Slave (which is told through the eyes of twentieth century historian Melton A. McLaurin), we discover that Celia loves the slave man called George (29), but must choose between loving him and initially forced but continued concubinage (24-28). With violence, Celia resolves her dilemma. In the act of self-defense, she commits homicide (35-36). The protagonist Linda Brent, however, proposes another solution. When she realizes that she cannot have the man of her choosing—a "carpenter . . . a free born man" (37)—she chooses a white man because she desires protection for herself and her yet unborn children (54-55).

Although Mary Prince did not pen her narrative, and even though she had no models by which to "enrich and enlarge" her own "view of existence," A West Indian Slave is nonetheless a prototype of nineteenth-century African American autobiography. And Mary Prince, herself, is a foremother in the African American autobiographical tradition, in particular, and the African American literary tradition in general.
Notes

1. While other African narratives may yet be discovered, these will still have preceded Prince’s: A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, An African Prince, as Related by Himself (1770); Ottobah Cugoano, Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery (1787); Venture Smith, A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa; but Resident above Sixty Years in the United States of America, Related By Himself (1798); Sierra Leone Company, Substance of the Reports Delivered by the Court of the Sierra Leone Company, to the General Court of Proprietors to Which Is Prefixed Memoirs of Laimbanna, an African Prince (1799); George White, Account of Life, Experience, Travels, and Gospel Labours of George White, an African, Written by Himself and Revised by a Friend (1810); The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, The African Preacher (1815); and William, The Negro Servant: An Authentic Narrative of a Young Negro, Showing How He Was Made a Slave in Africa, and Carried to Jamaica, Where He Was Sold to a Captain in His Majesty’s Navy, and Taken to America, Where He Became a Christian, and Afterwards Brought to England and Baptised [sic] (1815). Likewise, while other African American may yet be discovered, these will still have preceded Prince’s: A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings, and Surprising [sic] Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man,—Servant to General Winslow, of Marshfield, in New England: Who Returned to Boston, after having been absent almost Thirteen Years, Containing An Account of the many Hardships he underwent from the time he left his master’s house, in the year 1747, to the Time of his Return to Boston,—How he was cast away in the Capes of Florida,—the horrid Cruelty and inhuman barbarity of the Indians in murdering the whole Ship’s Crew,—the Manner of his being carried by them into captivity. Also, An Account of his being Confin’d Four Years and Seven Months in a close Dungeon—and the remarkable Manner in which he met with his good old Master in London: who returned to New-England, a Passenger, in the same Ship (1760); A Narrative of the Lord’s Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black (Now going to Preach the Gospel in Nova Scotia) Born in New York, in North America. Taken down from his own relation, Arranged, Corrected, and Published by the Reverend Mr. Aldridge (1785); Sketches of the Life of Joseph Mountain, a Negro, Who Was Executed at New Haven, on the 20th Day of October, 1790, for a Rape, Committed on the 26th Day of May Last (1790); Benjamin F. Prentiss, The Blind American Slave or Memoirs of Boyreree Brincho (1810); Confessions of John Joyce (1818); Incidents in the Life of Solomon Bayley (1820); Life of William Grimes (1824); Narrative of Some Remarkable Incidents in the Life of Solomon Bayley, Formerly a Slave in the State of Delaware, North America, Written by Himself (1825); and Life and Adventures of Robert Voorhis, the Hermit of Massachusetts, Who Has Lived Fourteen Years in a Cave, Secluded from Human Society, Comprising an account of his Birth, Parentage, Sufferings, and Providential Escape from Unjust and Cruel Bondage in Early Life—and His Reasons for Becoming a Recluse. Taken from his own mouth by Henry Trumbull, and published for his benefit (1829). Davis and Gates, The Slave’s Narrative 319-321.

2. Many scholars consider Douglass’s autobiography a masterful work. Olney 153; Smith, introduction, 1; Baker, introduction, Narrative of Frederick Douglass, an American
Slave, Written by Himself (New York: Penguin, 1987), 15; Gates, introduction, The Classic Slave Narratives xii; Andrews, introduction, Three Classic African-American Novels (New York: Penguin, 1990) ll and To Tell a Free Story 138; Deborah E. McDowell, “In the First Place: Making Frederick Douglass and the Afro-American Narrative Tradition,” African American Autobiography (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1993) 37, 39; and Blight, “A Psalm of Freedom,” Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s P, 1993) vii. By all accounts, Douglass’s autobiography was an international best seller. In less than six months of the first printing, it sold 5,000 copies. Within the first two years of publication an additional 11,000 copies were sold in the United States, and 9 editions were printed in Great Britain. Also it was translated into French and German. At the dawn of the Civil War, a total of 30,000 copies had been sold both in the United States and Europe. After 1850, interest in Douglass’s autobiography ceased and it went out of print. It was not until the 1950s that scholarly interest in An American Slave emerged, primarily as a result of the civil rights and black power movements and renewed interest in African American history. According to Blight, in the 1970s and 1980s “Douglass’s first autobiography emerged fully from obscurity and entered the larger American canon” (18). See also Gates (xi) and Andrews, Three Classic (II).

3. There can be little doubt of the success of Equiano’s autobiography. Eight English editions were published in Great Britain; in 1791 one was printed in the United States. It was translated into Dutch in 1791, German in 1792, and Russian in 1794. Well into the nineteenth century, his autobiography was reprinted; three editions included Phillis Wheatley’s Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral. Following an emerging interest in Anglophone African literatures, his autobiography was revived in the 1950s. See Andrews, “Voices of the First Fifty Years” in To Tell a Free Story (56); Gates, “The Trope of the Talking Book,” The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism (New York: Oxford UP, 1988) 153; and Black Writers in Britain 1760-1890, eds. Paul Edwards and David Dabydeen (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1991) 54. Despite the popularity of Equiano’s autobiography, Douglass did not keep a personal copy in his library. See “List of Books in Frederick Douglass’s Library,” Frederick Douglass National Historic Site, National Capital Parks—East, Washington, DC.


7. Actually Douglass re-named himself several times: Frederick Bailey, Frederick Stanley, Frederick Johnson, then finally Frederick Douglass, “a Scottish character in Scott’s The Lady of the Lake”; see Gates, “Frederick Douglass and the Language of the Self;”


14. Douglass’s autobiography is Olney’s model, because he regards it “the most exact representative” of the genre (154). In the introduction to the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Baker esteems Douglass’s autobiography as “the most representative” (New York: Penguin, 1987) 15. In Blight’s introduction, he posits An American Slave as Douglass’s “effort to work through an anguished past representative of many African American slaves” (viii). All references to Douglass’s autobiography are to the edition edited by Blight.


18. Nine years following the publication of Prince’s A West Indian Slave, and five years prior to Douglass’s An American Slave, Juan Francisco Manzano, an Afro-Cuban ex-slave,
penning his Autobiography. Like Prince's, it was published in London by a British abolitionist, Richard Robert Madden. Despite cultural and linguistic differences, Luis A. Jimenez compares the autobiographies of Manzano and Douglass in “Nineteenth Century Autobiography in the Afro-Americas: Frederick Douglass and Juan Francisco Manzano.” Cross-cultural themes include the absence of knowledge of the narrator's personal history (i.e., a birth date), and the acquisition of literacy and self-liberation. See Afro-Hispanic Review (Fall 1995): 47-52.

19. This lack of information about one’s personal history is a revised theme in the historical novel, The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman by Ernest Gaines. The 100+ year old ex-slave woman and protagonist confesses that she too lacks information about her birth date. She estimates that she was either “ten or ‘leven” when she was made a fieldhand, and that “a year after that the Freedom come” (Toronto: Bantam, 1976) 10.


24. Douglass enjoyed American literature (e.g., William Wells Brown, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Washington Irving, and John Greenleaf Whittier); writings by white American women (e.g., Fannie Fern, Margaret Fuller, and Harriet Beecher Stowe), African American women (Harriet Jacobs, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Victoria Earle Matthews), as well as other works about women. Also he read a volume of poetry by a Cuban slave. He read autobiographies, biographies and memoirs including William Wells Brown, Rousseau, Abraham Lincoln, John Brown, Herman Cortes, and Moses Roper. His collection included various histories: Biblical; African, Caribbean and American slavery; European persecution; peoples of African descent in the United States and Africa, peoples of European descent in Europe, and peoples of Asian descent in China; wars in the United States and abroad; the Jubilee singers of Fisk University; and pictorial histories of the world, the Civil War, and American slavery. He also read the classics, for example, Homer's The Iliad, Alexander Dumas’s The Three Musketeers, and Victor Hugo’s Les Misérables). Also included in his collection are other European ethnic literatures: British literature (William Shakespeare, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, Charles Dickens, and Alfred Lord Tennyson; German, Irish, and Hungarian literatures. Additionally, Douglass's holdings consisted of annual reports of the Smithsonian Institute, post-master general of the United States, the railroad commission, anti-slavery societies, congressional and senate proceedings, and the proceedings of KKK trials. He read books on various other topics (religion, science,
geography, and philosophy) and reference books include a concordance to Shakespeare, dictionaries (Roman and Greek authors, English and French, and medical terms), encyclopedias (English literature and general knowledge), and quotations of British poets as well as Greek, Latin and modern languages. Finally, there were textbooks on grammar (Latin, Greek and English) and mathematics, for example, algebra and geometry. See “List of Books in Frederick Douglass’s Library,” Frederick Douglass National Historic Site, National Capital Parks—East, Washington, DC.

25. It is possible that this poet was Juan Francisco Manzano. This volume of poetry is titled Poems by a Slave in the Island of Cuba and was published by Richard Robert Madden, the abolitionist and writer who published Manzano’s Autobiography in 1840.

CHAPTER 5

A FINAL WORD ON

METHODOLOGY, RATIONALE AND CONTEXTS

So my ‘method’ . . . is not fixed but related to what I read and to the historical context of the writers I read and to the many critical activities in which I am engaged, which may or may not involve writing. It is a learning from the language of creative writers, which is one of surprise, so that I might discover what language I might use. For my language is very much based on what I read and how it affects me, that is, on the surprise that comes from reading something that compels you to read differently, as I believe literature does. I therefore, have no set method . . . since for me every work suggests a new approach.

— Barbara Christian, “A Race For Theory,” Making Face, Making Soul

Although a slim volume, the History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, Related by Herself is a complex work that invites multiple readings. In this project, I discuss three contexts for this work and, in the process, construct three very different and seemingly unrelated Mary Princes: Mary Prince, the Everywoman; Mary Prince, the narrator/protagonist; and Mary Prince, the literary historical figure.
At the center of Mary Prince, the Everywoman, is my maternal great-grandmother Emily Johnson Foster who, according to Uncle Bubble, looked like “a poor old white woman.” My African American experience begins with her.

Great-grandmother Emily was born into slavery and was a young girl during the Civil War. Until her sale to Calvin Bryce of Woodward, South Carolina, it is said that great-grandmother lived on the June Place, somewhere in Virginia. After the Civil War, she did not head west in search of the American Dream as did other ex-slaves. Nor apparently did she search for other relatives from who she had been separated as a consequence of slavery. But rather, like so many ex-slave men and women, great-grandmother remained with “Marse Calvin,” as his slaves called him, now working in his kitchen for pay. Sometime later, she married a black man by the name of Andy Foster. Together, they had eleven children. One of the eleven was Easter, my grandmother. She was born in 1888 in Woodland, South Carolina and was named after great-grandmother’s sister. In 1905 or 1906 Easter married Ben Hill. They had eighteen children, nine boys and six girls. My mother, Lula Bea, was born in 1921 and was named after my paternal grandmother.

This is all that I know about my maternal family line. Indeed it is filled with gaps and silent spaces. I do not know my maternal great-grandmother’s date of birth, how she happened to be on the June Place, or where in Virginia the June Place was located. Unknown too is her parentage. I know that Emily’s mother was a slave, because Emily inherited her mother’s slave status. But I don’t know my maternal great-great-grandmother’s name any more than I know the name of my maternal great-great-grandfather. I suspect, however, that he was white. Of the circumstances of Emily’s birth, I know nothing. And there is much
more information that I lack about great-grandmother, for example, why she was separated from her mother, siblings, and perhaps extended family; what a typical day in her life was like; why she remained with “Marse Calvin” after the Civil War; and why she had children with him. This lack of information about my family history is not unique. Countless men and women of African descent find it difficult to trace their ancestry from the southern United States to the Caribbean Islands to specific West African countries; the most notable exception is Alex Haley. In the autobiographies and oral histories of ex-slaves, we refer to this lack of information as textual and chronological gaps, sometimes willful silent spaces, and other times intentional omissions.

But of even more interest to me than that which was happening around and to great-grandmother Emily is how she felt about that which was happening around and to her. Accessing this information is impossible because great-grandmother left no written record of her life. And because she apparently did nothing of any historical significance, her life was not deemed worthy enough for recognition by historians. Moreover, memories and recollections of those old enough to have known her have either been dimmed by the passage of time or buried before I would come along in search of my mothers’ gardens. But what I cannot know about Emily, I can know about Mary Prince because she did leave a record of her lived experience. Incomplete, though this account may be, it is a record nonetheless from which we may begin to re-construct her life, and most especially what Toni Morrison, in “The Site of Memory,” refers to as the “interior life” of slave narrators (111):

It’s a kind of literary archaeology: on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind
and to reconstruct the world that those remains imply. . . . to yield up a kind of truth. (112)

In my telling of Mary Prince’s life, I tell a “kind of truth” about her “interior life,” because otherwise my telling would be merely a formulaic representation of a stereotypical slave woman, any slave woman, in this case, Mary Prince, a West Indian slave woman. Why do I say that my telling would only be a formulaic representation of a stereotypical slave woman, any slave woman? I say this because it is likely that Miss Susanna Strickland asked Prince a series of questions and that Prince’s responses became what we know today as her oral autobiography. These questions perhaps included, but were not limited to: Where were you born? Who were your parents? Did you ever witness the maltreatment of other slaves? How did your masters treat you? Which of your masters and/or mistresses was kind to you? What was a typical day like? Did you convert to Christianity? Did you marry?

Central to Miss Strickland’s questions is Prince’s exterior life but never her thoughts and feelings about these external occurrences. Morrison reasons that

In shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they [slave men and women narrators] were silent about many things, and they ‘forgot’ many other things. . . . But most importantly—at least for me—there was no mentioning of their interior life. (110)

Indeed, these questions to which Prince responded offer little information about her “interior life.” We do not know, for instance, how she felt about not being present for her parents’ funerals or whether Prince was a mother or not. These are examples of gaps and silent spaces that I fill in so that I can know a “kind of truth” about Mary Prince. It is a truth that she was a human being, coincidentally female and black or black and female. It is a truth that she was
born and that she lived within a particular time and space, that she had feelings and hopes and desires. It is a truth that however she made sense of her world, she lived accordingly. This is one of the ways that I read A West Indian Slave, and it is the way that I tell Mary Prince’s life.

I am fully aware in my telling of Prince’s life, that much of her life is unknown and perhaps unknowable. This is so because history falsely conceived humanity in terms of complexion and gender. But like Morrison, I too want to “journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply” (112). My intention is not to re-invent a past that did not exist, but rather, to construct a Mary Prince whose lived experience—even today—saves the lives of countless unknown and perhaps unknowable slave men and women as well as their descendants. I am thinking particularly of my maternal great-grandmother Emily Johnson Foster. I believe that to tell Mary Prince’s life is not only to once again save her life, but also to save the lives of my great-grandmother, my grandmother, and my mother. Collectively speaking, to tell the life of Mary Prince is to save my own life.

Because Mary Prince is Everywoman, my telling of her life is my own story. And in my story, I take license to construct a slave woman who is mightily heroic. I deliberately select that which I want to emphasize and only briefly mention that which I deem of far less value. Let me explain.

For six years Prince had a lengthy relationship with white Captain Abbot. I mention this fact of her life once, maybe twice, but with certain reluctance. Jenny Sharpe, in “‘Something Akin to Freedom’: The Case of Mary Prince,” speculates that Prince negotiated
for her freedom by offering her body: “It is likely that she made an arrangement with Abbot to serve as his housekeeper—which was the term used for concubines—in exchange for her purchase price” (44). Perhaps she did negotiate a seven-year contract; I do not know. It is as likely that although Prince and Abbott lived in a world that defined itself as either black or white, that blackness and whiteness—at least between individuals—did not deny love, that black and white men and women could and did love each other. This might well have been the case with Prince and Abbott; I do not know. With the publication of Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Harriet Jacobs makes clear a previously little known fact, that some black women chose white men. Jacobs’ motive for choosing a white gentleman with whom to have children had nothing to do with love, but rather, her desire to exercise power over her life and body. Perhaps this was the case with Prince and Abbot and my great-grandmother and “Marse Calvin,” as well. Because black/white relations were not as rigid as black and white, I mention the Prince/Abbot relationship once or twice because, quite simply, I do not know how to define their relationship. But more importantly, the Prince/Abbot story is not the story that I want to tell.

The story that I want to tell is the story of a black woman and man who fall in love with each other. The story that I want to tell is about how and where they meet, their courtship and their marriage. In my story I want to imagine a black couple—slave woman and free black man—in love. I want to tell this story because romance is another aspect of their interior lives about which there is no mention in slave narratives and oral histories—and thus the story of Mary Prince, the slave woman, and Daniel James, the free man. As a twentieth-century black woman in search of my own mothers’ gardens, this story about black
love is spiritually satisfying, much more so than relationships with white men in which slave women, regardless of their motives, were essentially powerless.

Where Mary Prince, the Everywoman, ends with a highly personalized quote from Barbara Christian ("I can only speak for myself. But what I write and how I write is done in order to save my own life. And I mean that literally"), a different Mary Prince emerges, this time as an Afro-Caribbean narrator/protagonist otherwise defined by Sharpe as "the speaking subject of The History of Mary Prince" (32). As Sharpe points out, the problem of voice raises a critical question for academics in this second wave of recovery of this West Indian slave woman and her narrative: Who is actually speaking in A West Indian Slave, Mary Prince or Thomas Pringle? In other words, is Prince the "speaking subject of the slave narrative," or is she the "spoken for’ object in the pro- and anti-slavery debates" (36)? It is a question that merits discussion.

Very early into this project, I decided that Prince’s authentic voice was seldom heard. I decided also that the absence of her authentic voice did not necessarily mean truth could not be located in her oral autobiography. I made this decision even though I understood then and understand now the inherent problems associated with translation (there is no literal translation) and cultural bias. Sharpe speaks quite eloquently regarding this matter:

As Pringle explains in his preface, the twenty-three page story was recorded ‘from Mary’s own lips’ by a friend of his, Susan Strickland, and later ‘pruned’ of redundancies and grammatical errors ‘so as to render it clearly ‘intelligible’ . . . . This statement deauthorizes the speaker in the very act of authorizing the written record of her words. Prince probably spoke patois, the creolized speech of slaves that combined English, Spanish, French, and West African languages. The need to render her story into standard English is a comment on the perceived inferiority and unintelligibility of her speech. (38)
Sharpe’s understanding of the culture into which Prince spoke her truth is flawless. It is indeed a fact that languages spoken by people of color were judged inferior and unintelligible. The current multi-cultural debates testify to the truthfulness of this fact. But what choice did Prince (who lacked authorial control) have, except to allow her story to become a kind of truth as seen through the conventional eyes of the Strickland and Pringle. To their credit, Prince’s story might never have been heard, and therefore neither a first nor second wave recovery of *A West Indian Slave* had her oral autobiography been published in her authentic speaking voice. In drawing attention to this obvious truth, I do not mean to suggest that to deny someone their language is either moral or ethical. It is not. But this is the world into which Mary Prince was born, and until the recent multicultural debates and the subsequent re-thinking of the literary canon and serious inquiry into the subjectivity of history, it is the world into which we all were born.

Armed with this fundamental understanding about the relativity of history (i.e., what can we really know about a past that falsely conceived humanity in terms of complexion and gender?), at the outset of this project I resolved that whether as subject or object of *A West Indian Slave*, the protagonist is nevertheless a truth-teller, and her truth-telling rings true for all enslaved men and women of African descent in the Americas. But I must confess that I did not fully appreciate the subjectivity of this truth-telling protagonist until I read *A West Indian Slave* alongside other-cultured, female-centered narratives of the African Diaspora, such as Jacobs *A Slave Girl*.

Comparatively speaking, both Prince and Jacobs provide unique perspectives of a larger story about New World slavery and female slaves. While culturally-specific readings
of *A West Indian Slave* and *A Slave Girl* allow for greater understanding of particular individuals within particular slave cultures (i.e., British West Indies and southern United States), cross-cultural readings insist on the recognition of boundaries (e.g., ethnicity, culture, and history), while simultaneously encouraging a greater understanding of experiences shared by persons of African descent in the New World. Such a reading fosters a more complete story, which is to say, multiple perspectives of a larger story about the collective experiences of enslaved persons of African descent in the Americas. It seems of little importance that these narratives are peopled differently, that the action is played out on different terrain and separated by large bodies of water. Unintentionally *A Slave Girl* corroborates *A West Indian Slave*. The inadvertent truth is that these ethnically-different female narrators relate shared experiences about sexual abuse, unrealized sisterhood between slave women and white women, and their tireless efforts to resist to their enslavement. In their own words, and sometimes in the words of their amanuenses and editors, these female narrators construct themselves as rebels who are determined to fight a verbal fight for their humanity.

Interestingly enough, scholars of women's history (African American and Afro-Caribbean) and cultural studies support these women's representations of themselves. Largely because of the scholarship of Angela Davis, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Barbara Bush, Deborah Gray White, and Darlene Clark Hine (to name a few), we now know that not all slave women accommodated slavery; that some women—Mary Prince and Harriet Jacobs, for example—actively resisted the dehumanizing effects of the slave cultures into which they were born.
Whether Mary Prince is “the speaking subject of The History of Mary Prince” or the “spoken for’ object in the pro-and antislavery debates” is a moot point. But in the meanwhile, A West Indian Slave is an important work for at least two reasons. First, to scholars and students of Women’s Studies, Black Studies, Comparative Literatures, and Cultural Studies, this early female-centered narrative allows for examinations of shared experiences. Second, to students and scholars of American Literature and African American Literature, A West Indian Slave is an important work because it allows for interrogations of difference that somehow become blurred within a male-centered narrative tradition.

Male-centeredness and tradition bring me to Mary Prince, the literary historical figure. As such, she joins the ranks of notable African American women who, because of a culturally and historically male-centered tradition, were forgotten, misplaced, or otherwise lost. Previously I have discussed the scholarly reclamations of Harriet E. Adams Wilson, Harriet Ann Jacobs and Zora Neale Hurston. In Invented Lives, Margaret Helen Washington adds the names of other women, including Gwendolyn Brooks, Nella Larsen, Ann Petry, and Dorothy West (xv, xx-xxi). Although my purpose in this work is not to argue for a black women’s literary tradition (other scholars have argued quite convincingly for such a tradition’), I would like to add Mary Prince’s name to this impressive canon of African American women. Her oral autobiography, like the works for which these women are noted, did indeed “influence and determine the direction and shape of the literary canon” (Washington xix).

I read A West Indian Slave as an early example of the African American autobiographical form and Prince as a significant contributor to African American literary
history. A close textual reading of this slim volume reveals that established in it are the themes of representativeness and bi-racialism, the motif of naming, the archetypal old and useless slave, the image of the slave woman's body publicly exposed, language patterns, and conventional scenes. These themes, motifs, archetypes, images, language patterns, and conventional scenes recur in Douglass's 1845 autobiography as well as in fiction, for example, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*. Thus, to students and scholars of the genre, as well as African American literary and intellectual history, the *History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, Related by Herself* is an important text because it once again challenges us to re-think the canon.

But more, this autobiography is an important read for students and scholars of world literatures of the African Diaspora, because, until Prince's re-discovery and the scholarly reclamation of her narrative, male-centeredness defined the odyssey of persons of African descent in the Americas: *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* and the *Narrative of the Life Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*. Literally, Mary Prince's *A West Indian Slave* adds another perspective to the previously unfinished story of the dispersal of Africans during the slave trade, and thus a more complete story of the displacement of descendants of Africans in the New World. Symbolically, these three narratives represent a master slave narrative, one that moves from the west coast of Africa to the Caribbean to the southern United States.
By way of explanation, let me say that I have taken a sketchy tale and through lenses that are historical, cultural, and literary have read within and between the spaces, as well as into the margins, and have filled in what I believe are important gaps. At times, my work seems a re-telling of the plot. It is, but only because of the necessity of a re-telling (perhaps a second or third time) in order to make a point about a different reading of Prince’s autobiography and Prince. A West Indian Slave is, after all, a story that should be told, re-told and then told again. Overall, I believe that the larger significance of my work, which is to suggest contexts for reading the History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, Related by Herself and telling the life of Mary Prince, far outweigh my inclusion of repetitive, but necessary detail.

Finally, I believe that A West Indian Slave is an enabling text, because it is spiritually and intellectually healing. When Mary Prince told her story to Miss Strickland, she probably did not know that the life she was saving was her own, and she certainly could not have known that her autobiography would save the lives of countless descendants of enslaved men and women in the Americas. In the end, my hope is that this second-wave recovery project does justice to Mary Prince’s lived experience and to the spirit of Mary Prince that is present in those of who have chosen to be witnesses.
Notes

Bibliography


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