

**THE PLURALIZED "I": WHITE APPROPRIATION
OF BLACK WOMEN'S VOICES IN
*THE HISTORY OF MARY PRINCE: A WEST INDIAN SLAVE
NARRATIVE***

Author:
Steven Cason

Faculty Sponsor:
Michelle Tarter
Department of English

ABSTRACT

What is the black female voice? The sad albeit true answer to that question is no one knows, not even black females. As a result, scholars who have studied the underrepresented works of black women – including the late African American academic Nellie McKay – have coined the term “true black womanhood” in reference to the abstract concept of unadulterated literary expression belonging to women of African descent. Much of the disconnect between this marginalized group of writers and their authorial identity stems from the harrowing historical practice of appropriating autobiographies penned by individuals of color (usually ex-slaves) for the sake of the political advancement of members of the white majority. Enter Mary Prince, the author of the first autobiography published in England by a black woman. By linking the dearth of narrative agency in Prince’s chronicle to the self-centered machinations of her editor and scribe, this essay strives to bridge the gap between black female autobiographers of both the past and the present, identify a common practice of authorial obstruction, and proclaim the need for the termination of such a suffocating and archaic publishing convention.

INTRODUCTION

Autobiographical writing is seldom devoid of challenges and hardships. Much of the process revolves around dredging up past events and experiences often permeated by varying degrees of emotional trauma and depression. As difficult as that task is on its own, a writer should consider herself lucky if painful retrospection is the only obstacle she faces; for many, the list of deterrents is marked with dozens of items. Members of marginalized groups in particular fight losing battles for control of their stories every time they gesture their work towards publication. Of all such authorial conflicts, most of them spanning centuries, not one has succeeded more in restricting the vocal cords of autobiographers than the war waged against black women. The forgotten demographic of America, and arguably the world, black women have long been denied access to the femininity guarded by their white counterparts, birthing the necessity to seek out so-called “true black womanhood” (McKay 106). One such black woman whose work embodies the tradition of stifling colored expression is Mary Prince, a 19th century West Indian slave. The mutilation, politicization, and abridgement of Prince’s narrative, particularly in regard to her self-presentation, the appropriation of her body, and her artistic authority, represents the timeless struggle of black female autobiographers to articulate their unvarnished voice and assume an identity designed both for themselves and by themselves.

Given that her tale is inherently a slave narrative, Mary Prince’s autobiography was doomed to exploitation from the moment she suggested that her story be written. In the 1800s, ex-slaves did not simply compose an account of their bondage and self-publish it on Amazon to feed a Northern readership hungry for sagas of Southern adventure. Instead, their work had to be vetted, approved, and endorsed by a reputable white person whose status alone could reassure readers of the validity of black words. To make the narratives more ‘appropriate’ for white eyes, extensive editing was done to the

manuscripts prior to publication, often resulting in a proverbial shouting match in which two or more voices competed for textual supremacy. This process conflicts with the definition of slave narratives which states that “they are predicated on the capacity of an individual narrator to represent, to stand for and stand *in* for, those whose voices have been silenced but whose stories are interwoven with the narratives of others” (Brodzki 45). How can a writer ever hope to preserve her narrative self in the face of such a hostile editing procedure, let alone utilize her work as a spiritual conduit for the voices of others? Frankly, such a feat is impossible, which by extension makes Prince’s primary goal of seizing her black womanhood effectively unobtainable. Unfortunately, Prince’s rare opportunity to share her tale of forced servitude was unaccompanied by a guarantee of authorial sovereignty.

ABOLITION AND APPROPRIATION

During the 19th century, the root of white obstruction of ex-slaves’ autobiographies was none other than Abolitionism. Despite crusading against the wickedness of slavery, abolitionists committed a grievous crime against the very people whom they purported to champion: exercising the liberty of disfiguring the words of dozens of black people to advertise their own political agenda. In essence, white abolitionists *owned* black writing. Even the very structure of slave narratives, as delineated by famed historian James Olney in the 1980s, derived from the questions in which abolitionists asked former slaves during interviews, such as “circumstances of birth and family ... cruel overseers and resisting slaves ... plans and attempts to escape ... and a brief account of life since [slavery]” (Sekora 502). The term ‘slave narrative’ then is somewhat of a misnomer; ‘anti-slavery narrative’ would be much more fitting given that the ulterior political motive outweighed the importance of accurately rendering a maltreated human being. Prince’s autobiography exhibits all of the traditional qualities of an ‘anti-slavery narrative’, even beginning with the classic opening, “I was born at Brackish-Pond, in Bermuda, on a farm belonging to Mr. Charles Myners” (Prince 3). In other words, the very form of Prince’s narrative does not belong to her, which in turn compromises the singularity of her history’s content. Due to the exploitative priorities of abolitionists, slave narratives such as Prince’s were treated less as autobiography and more so as documents appropriated to “authorize white institutional power” (Sekora 502).

Upon examining Prince’s autobiography in earnest, one finds that her narrative adheres to the aforementioned custom of split authorship. In addition to Prince herself, two other figures left their indelible marks on the text: Thomas Pringle, a member of the British Anti-Slavery Society, and Susanna Strickland, Pringle’s Methodist friend (Allen 509). By amalgamating Prince’s narration, Strickland’s transcription, and Pringle’s editorial modifications, the resulting combination yields a piece that merely masquerades as a portrait illustrating a singular subject. Beneath such a guise, the narrative “wrenches Mary back into the foreground alongside Pringle and Strickland; all of them are performing the narrative and all of them are competing for interpretive authority” (Banner 307). Competition among Prince and her white benefactors served only to erect a roadblock bisecting her path to obtaining her true black womanhood. As a black woman, Prince faced the estrangement of neither belonging in the same social group as white woman nor that of black men, given Western civilization’s tendency to favor “whiteness and maleness” (McKay 97). The journey to discovering the black female self, therefore, is one that Prince needed to embark upon either alone or accompanied only by her similarly alienated sisters. Instead, each of her two associates possessed at least one of society’s golden traits, which armed them with the weapons required to conquer Prince’s insufficiently defended text regardless of her wishes.

The main factor that divested Prince of the opportunity to employ complete authority over her narrative was her inability to operate a quill. Denied the gift of literacy due to the shade of her skin pigmentation, Prince could not physically transfer her words to parchment, leaving her no alternative other than entrusting the security of her recitation to her white transcriber, Susanna Strickland. On the significance of literacy, Lindon Barrett states:

To restrict African Americans to lives without literacy is seemingly to immure them in bodily existences having little or nothing to do with the life of the mind and its representation. Conversely, to enter into literacy is to gain important skills for extending oneself beyond the condition and geography of the body. (419)

Although referring to the downtrodden Africans who underwent quasi-assimilation in the United States, Barrett's assessment applies just as smoothly to blacks oppressed in regions under British colonial rule. In autobiographical writing, literacy and narrative authority are woven together like wires on a chain-link fence; without one, the integrity of the whole is threatened. Prince's lack of literacy made it impossible for her to truly awaken her dormant black womanhood, for no other aspect of the writing process is more crucial than the actual *writing*. By orally relaying her story to Strickland, Prince unwittingly surrendered the novelty of her black voice to someone who was fundamentally incapable of conveying its richness and nuance. Most of the subtleties that survived the transcription were destroyed by the ruthless editorial pen wielded by Thomas Pringle, whose intrusive narrative shadow looms so large as to dwarf that of Strickland's.

If Prince is the sympathetic protagonist of her publishing story – the character with whom the audience identifies and roots for – then Thomas Pringle is the loathsome antagonist who garners the audience's bile and vitriol. In Pringle's preface to Prince's narrative, the Scottish editor describes the finished product as "pruned into its present shape; retaining, as far as was practicable, Mary's exact expressions and peculiar phraseology" (Pringle 1). Pringle proceeds to write about Prince's disposition towards repeating herself throughout her recitation. Regarding Pringle's handling of Prince's chronic reiteration, "although in his preface he attempts to emphasize Prince's humanity to promote anti-slavery sentiments, his dismissal and removal of her repetition violate her subjectivity by overlooking her authorial decisions" (Allen 510). Pringle symbolizes the epitome of the archetypal 'benevolent' abolitionist who prioritized politics over authenticity. As previously established, black womanhood is a state of being long ostracized from all others, and it has developed a distinctive 'otherness' over the centuries. As a result, black womanhood is foreign to virtually all who do not exhibit that particular sexual and racial combination. So, when Pringle references Prince's "exact expressions ... peculiar phraseology ... redundances and gross grammatical errors" (Pringle 1), whether known or unknown to him, the appositive of such terms is in fact Prince's *blackness*. By pruning Prince's narrative through his sole editorial eye, Pringle denudes the text of its genuine black attire, clothing it instead with garments tailored for the white public of England.

Thanks to the joint seizure of her narrative by Pringle and Strickland, Prince, disarmed of her most potent weapon – her authorial 'I' – failed her quest to discover her black identity. Control over one's authorial 'I' is absolutely necessary for an autobiographer to accurately portray who she is. However, in the case of Mary Prince's publication, the singular pronoun 'I' has been pluralized by both her scribe and her editor as the pair vies for textual superiority. The final draft of Prince's story contradicts the insistence of single authorship preached by her editor because "her lyric voice is guarded by Pringle, as are her feelings, her thoughts, her self-conscious reflections about the interplay of past and present, and her authority over the text" (Paquet 137). Each of the incorporeal elements that Paquet lists are vital components of prose writing, fiction and non-fiction alike. Autobiographical writing in particular thrives off of the effective conveyance of feelings, thoughts, and reflections. Similarly, true black womanhood, like all human conditions, is comprised of a particular vintage of feelings, thoughts, and reflections. Pringle's editorial grasp on these instrumental writing tools was true and firm, denying Prince of the ferry needed to traverse the sea boasting her island of self-discovery. Essentially, Pringle erected a wall between a vocal Prince and her audience, deflecting her words and producing a distorted echo of her voice; what she truly wished to say simply dissipated into the wind, never to be heard in its original state.

BLACK FEMINISM AND THE BODY

One recurring theme that pervades black feminism is the portrayal, treatment, and mistreatment of the body. This subject can be interpreted in two broad ways: the *clothed* body and the *bare* body. Regarding the former, clothing played a significant role in the lives of black slaves. The forlorn rags cast onto them served as constant reminders of their poor class and prescribed subhumanity, especially when juxtaposed with the colorful, expensive fabrics donned by their masters. For the few fortunate enough to pen a slave narrative, the depiction of clothing provided valuable content to enrich their tales of the dehumanizing institution. Eulanda Sanders states that "dress and appearance were salient aspects of the narrators' lives

and useful literary tools for explaining the complexities of life in slave environments" (277). Upon scanning Prince's narrative for references to dress, one finds that the most popular occasion in which the West Indian woman alludes to clothing is, in fact, when she is forcefully deprived of it. Other than when she is washing garments as one of her duties, Prince typically uses the word 'stripped' in reference to her own attire, such as when she says, "she stripped and flogged me long and severely with the cow-skin" (Prince 12). Prince's apparent restraint to detail her outer apparel, as well as the dearth of descriptions of clothing in general, implicates none other than Thomas Pringle as the culprit. When Pringle writes in his preface that "No fact of importance has been omitted", his crafty diction has the distinct flavor of justification for removing any material in which he deemed insignificant. Descriptive detail likely fell victim to Pringle's pen before any other prosaic ingredient; this postulation is supported by the nature of the narrative, which is extremely bare-bones and plot-driven. Therefore, any attempts on Prince's part to extricate her black womanhood from years of repression through written illustrations of her clothing were foiled by Pringle, thus severing a key link between the autobiographer and her true self.

Prince's representation of her physical body, especially the pain inflicted upon it by her oppressors, is often expressed sparingly as opposed to sentimentally. Although present unlike delineations of clothing, depictions of Prince's body, which are normally conjunct with scenes of violence and debilitation, tend to lack the feelings and emotions one would associate with such cruelty. For example, the following instance of violence bears an eerie sense of formality: "Mr. D has often stripped me naked, hung me up by the wrists, and beat me with the cow-skin, with his own hand, till my body was raw with gashes" (Prince 16). In the aftermath of a similarly brutal beating at the hands of her master, Prince says, "... I was so sore with the flogging, that I scarcely cared whether I lived or died" (Prince 13). Both miniature excerpts read like a piece of black-and-white silent film; the viewer witnesses a clear visual, but the experience lacks sensation and color and is therefore quite unfulfilling. Prince's writing concerning her body deviates from the freedom of expression central to autobiographical composition, instead stylistically resembling a police report or a legal document in which emotion is intentionally omitted. Such an odd stylistic choice implies a decision made during the editing process since "Concrete language ... is more suitable for the political, didactic purposes for which most slave narratives were written" (Baumgartner 256). Once again, evidence of textual appropriation exposes itself to incriminate Pringle and Strickland. Since the goal of Prince's collaborators was to produce a succinct and straightforward text to advocate their anti-slavery stance, they left the work vastly uninhabited by the personal, the black, the *Mary Prince*, granting residency only to the core facts of her story. The product, then, is a mere skeletal frame of an autobiography devoid of flesh and blood. Given that her body was the vessel that housed her spirit, Prince's inability to enforce the inclusion of emotion surrounding her anatomy further handicapped her efforts to realize her true black womanhood.

CONCLUSION

Right or wrong, the fact of the matter is simple: Mary Prince's narrative is a *political document*; it is not an accurate portrayal of her voice. Too many people are speaking for this autobiography to belong to one person, and politics swarm the text like bees around a hive. Janice Schroeder states:

the text is ultimately less concerned with Prince's pain than with a number of other issues: the antislavery campaign in Britain on the eve of the legislative abolition of slavery (1833), the redefinition of England as an imperial power, the public denunciation of Pringle's proslavery adversaries, and, most markedly, Pringle's professional authority as an advocate and social reformer. (271)

Pringle, chiefly concerned with acquiring prestige among the British Anti-Slavery Society, usurped Prince's throne of authorial authority for his own personal gain. He ruled ruthlessly over her narrative, silencing any dissent and contriving a dominant ideology best suited for his political interests. Prince's black femininity, as exemplified by her aforementioned pain and emotional anguish, was Pringle's primary target of persecution. Through Pringle's excessive pruning, what little true black womanhood Prince managed to conjure during her initial recitation was squashed, replaced by cold, heartless,

formulaic prose. Although the morality of Pringle's editorial decisions remains debatable, the bottom line is indelibly set in stone: in supporting the cause to rob entitled white people of their slaves, Pringle simultaneously robbed a marginalized black woman of the voice that made her *her*.

The circumstances encompassing the publication of Mary Prince's autobiography are just as tragic as the harrowing account of slavery within its pages. Since customs of slave narrative publication necessitated Prince's partnership with Pringle and Strickland, her choices were rather limited: keep her story bottled up within her all the way to her interment, or allow the release of a pseudo-autobiography that, like a robotic clone, echoes her exterior while being bereft of genuine humanity. Prince, of course, chose the latter, thereby sacrificing any hope of recognizing her true black womanhood. Despite having been written almost two-hundred years ago, Prince's narrative is just as applicable to 21st century black women as it was to those of the 1800s. Times have certainly changed, and long gone are the days in which black voices are only shared by first passing through a white filter. Black women everywhere should study Prince, sympathize with her plight, identify their common dilemma, and assume the mantle of continuing to search for their long sought-after boon: the reconciliation of who they have been told to be and who they really are.

WORKS CITED

- Allen, Jessica L. "Pringle's Pruning of Prince: The History of Mary Prince and the Question of Repetition." *Callaloo*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2012, pp. 509-519.
- Banner, Rachel. "Surface and Stasis: Re-Reading Slave Narrative via 'The History of Mary Prince.'" *Callaloo*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2013, pp. 298-311.
- Barrett, Lindon. "African-American Slave Narratives: Literacy, the Body, Authority." *American Literary History*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1995, pp. 415-442.
- Baumgartner, Barbara. "The Body as Evidence: Resistance, Collaboration, and Appropriation in 'The History of Mary Prince.'" *Callaloo*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2001, pp. 253-275.
- Brodzki, Bella. "'Changing Masters': Gender, Genre, and the Discourses of Slavery." *Borderwork: Feminist Engagements with Comparative Literature*, edited by Margaret R. Higonnet, Cornell University Press, Ithaca; London, 1994, pp. 42-60.
- McKay, Nellie Y. "The Narrative Self: Race, Politics, and Culture in Black American Women's Autobiography." *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison; London, 1998, pp. 96-107.
- Paquet, Sandra Pouchet. "The Heartbeat of a West Indian Slave: The History of Mary Prince." *African American Review*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1992, pp. 131-146.
- Prince, Mary. *The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave Narrative*. Edited by Thomas Pringle. Dover Publications, Mineola, 2004.
- Sanders, Eulanda A. "Female Slave Narratives and Appearance: Assimilation, Experience, and Escape." *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, vol. 29, no. 4, Oct. 2011, pp. 267-283.
- Schroeder, Janice. "'Narrat[ing] Some Poor Little Fable': Evidence of Bodily Pain in 'The History of Mary Prince' and 'Wife-Torture in England.'" *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2004, pp. 261-281.
- Sekora, John. "Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative." *Callaloo*, no. 32, 1987, pp. 482-515.