Body and Voice: A Cultural Studies Analysis of the Authenticity of Mary Prince's Slave Narrative

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Scholars past and present of the History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave; Related by Herself have a variety of interpretations of her authorial views and the veracity of her narrative. The timing of publication was a contentious one, the Slavery Abolition Act was passed just two years later in 1833. Prior to its passing was an ongoing conflict between abolitionists and pro-slavery advocates who were vying for a propagandist voice in England at this time. There were three printings in England in its first year of 1831. There are also three scholarly editions of her work\(^1\). Part of the interest in the narrative stems from the debate about the authenticity of Prince’s articulation of her life as a West Indian slave. In the edited editions and scholarly research, different schools of thought emerge. There was attention given to the forewords by Thomas Pringle; Jessica L. Allen and Kaiama L. Glover attempt to show that Pringle’s editing minimizes Prince’s voice and agency and thus the message is lost; in contrast, Sandra Pouchet Paquet views her work as an example of the oral tradition dating back to West Africa, as Prince narrated her story to Susan Strickland, who worked for Thomas Pringle. Paquet shows how the voice does come through in this form. Part of the interest in the narrative stems from this debate about the authenticity of Prince's articulation of her life as a West Indian slave. Additionally, Margot Maddison-MacFadyen and Mary Jeanne Larrabee argue that Prince has a uniquely authoritative voice. Larrabee noting that Prince is minimalized because she was black and a

\(^1\) See Ferguson’s, Gates’s, Salih’s editions. All references to Prince’s narrative come from Salih’s edition.
woman, I contend this increases Prince’s agency, being the first female authors of a slave narrative. Prince's experiences and position as a female slave give her an authentic voice. Critics who question the authenticity of Mary Prince's narrative diminish the historical message and impact, maligning Prince's body and voice. This research will investigate the conflicting critiques of Prince's work. The points of contention I will analyze include: the narrative’s representation of her life, the dueling libel cases surrounding the release of her narrative, and her agency. This analysis of Prince's agency aims to enhance our understanding of the role of gender and race in Prince's subjectivity in creating this narrative.

Mary Prince's agency as a subject is looked at in varying ways by the editors of her narrative. As Ann B. Dobie defines in her introduction of cultural studies, a subject is socially constructed rather than an individual (Dobie 400). The agency of Prince is influenced by gender and race. During the place and time, England, 1831, Prince was given freedom legally, but by virtue of her station, including gender and race, she was not given a credible voice. Her agency was and is questioned. Editors of Prince's narrative talk quite a bit about Prince's agency, how it is diminished by her owners and strengthened through her own actions. Ferguson, Gates, and Salih hold similar views with a few subtle differences. Salih attempts to show that the oral form that Prince gives the narrative in is not conducive to a "…authorial persona or voice in her text…” (Salih xxvi). She goes on to argue that this made it a more effective tool in a political sense. While attempting to establish that History is indeed an abolitionist's tool, Jessica L. Allen throughout her article points to the influence of Thomas Pringle and his preface over Prince’s message: “I will begin by examining this preface to demonstrate how Pringle’s assumptions and abolitionist goals influenced his editorial decisions” (Allen 510). I contend it does not dissuade from the power of the narrative and the emotion that Prince gives. Prince's agenda was getting
the story out to help others. The oral tradition is thousands of years old, predating Prince’s narrative. Ferguson establishes the muted voice in bowing to the Christian values that dominated the time with the censoring of salacious documentation. This too cannot take from the message being delivered. Prince is able to weave into the narrative the horrors of slavery without breaking the censorship laws of the time. While there is much less introduction, Gates juxtaposes multiple slave narratives in his opening. Gates is quick to point out the uniqueness of Prince's narrative in a few ways. Prince is the first female slave to tell her story. Gates says Prince asserts her agency through her experiences and being the first: "Whereas black women are objects of narration in the tales written by black men, Prince's slim yet compelling story celebrates their self-transformation into subjects, subjects as defined by those who have gained a voice" (Gates 9). Gates also establishes the agency that Prince shows by her pioneering work and the exclusive point of view. There is a distinctiveness when it is coming from a woman who has endured sexual brutalization. Her goal is to inform the readers of the horrors, as Gates writes (9). The voice is on display in her narrative and its message. Establishing her agency can have an impact on the message. The History was written for an abolitionist publication in a society with censorship and deep Christian expectations.

Allen, as mentioned above, attempts to show that Prince's agency has been muted by Pringle through his pruning of the narrative. Allen has theories on the British dismissal of Creole, Pringle's bias, and the removal of repetition by Pringle as evidence of Pringle doing what all white men were doing to women, particularly slave women. I believe this is because of the times, her ethnicity, and because she was a woman and a slave. The times were volatile at best with the ongoing battle from the irreconcilable sides of the slavery or emancipation question. Scholars, such as Allen, dismiss Prince's authorial voice and agency, and attempt to show this is
in part due to the editing by Thomas Pringle. Allen investigates the absence of the Creole style of repetition as proof of this loss of voice: “These contexts will allow me to show how Pringle’s removal of Prince’s repetition violates her subjectivity as a narrator and reflects the wider anti-slavery struggles over control and representation of slavery, enslaved peoples, and ex-slave narrators” (Allen 510). Repetition in literature is a tool used to make a point clearer; something that is not unique to western literature, it is a tool in the storytelling style of Prince. I observe a noticeable use of this repetition many times in Prince's narrative to elicit the emotion that Prince felt using the Creole style of language: "It was then, however, my heavy lot to weep, weep, weep, and that for years; to pass from one misery to another, and from one cruel master to a worse" (Prince 16). The emotion elicited by the repetition is evident throughout her story. Allen interprets the contrived explanation by Pringle in the three editions as trying too hard to explain the validity of Prince. Allen also argues that the voice and editing of Pringle is part of an abolitionist's agenda. History shows that there was war going on with pro-slavery activists and the abolitionists. I argue that Pringle was just trying to get ahead of it because of the awareness of the ongoing fight for public perception. Prince is clearly speaking from the heart and a place of emotion, having lived the horror of slavery. Prince does indeed have an agency all her own in her narrative.

Scholars have investigated the history represented in Prince's narrative. Margot Maddison-MacFadyen looks specifically at the facts of her being enslaved in the West Indies at the times stated in the History. Maddison-MacFadyen establishes through her investigation that there is no exaggeration of the historical aspect of the narrative. She researches the slave registers, the history of the salt ponds, and the Moravian Church. Prince provides accounts of being taught to read and spell by Miss Fanny and by the Moravian (Prince 9, 29) the fact that
Prince is not illiterate gives her a better voice and credibility. The Creole phraseology would have been harder for a Briton to understand. This has been used as evidence for and against the validity of Prince's agency in the narrative. Allen's attempts in pursuing the pruning of Prince's voice through the lack of repetition already noted that there was a language difference. Prince sought out help in pursuing this work: "The idea of writing Mary Prince's history was first suggested by herself. She wished it to be done, she said that good people in England might hear from a slave what a slave had felt and suffered…" (Pringle 3). Pringle goes on to say that nothing important was left out nor added for any effect (Pringle 3). Maddison-MacFadyen establishes as well the liability Pringle would face in the courts if he did indeed exaggerate any of the work. These verifications add to the agency of Prince by putting the times in context.

The abolitionists and the pro-slavery activists were in a highly charged debate in 1831; this led to libel cases that came to a front after the publication of History. Two libel court cases were brought subsequent to the narrative's being published; one by Pringle against Thomas Cadell, a publisher in London. The second was brought against Pringle by Mr. Wood, Prince's most recent owner. The plaintiffs won on both accounts with Pringle winning a larger judgment and more convincingly. Of the scholarly editions of Prince's work, Gates does not delve into the significance of these cases. Wood was able to bring witnesses from Antigua while the Pringle/Prince side could not afford to do so. This had a definite impact on the message given at the trial. In the transcripts printed in Ferguson's scholarly edition, there are two contrasting stories of what took place.

Prior to the two trials, there had been a petition filed to Parliament in 1829 by Mary Prince to Mr. Wood. It concerned about buying her freedom. Ferguson notes that “This petition was another successful element in Mary Prince's ultimate ability to turn the tables on the Woods.
In the petition-expose as in the narrative, she is a public spokeswoman for all slaves against all slave masters, impugning their reputations in the very society in which they seek to vindicate themselves and slavery” (Ferguson 127). This aligns with my belief that Prince indeed did look at the greater good. She was a spokeswoman for the enslaved in the British West Indies and took it upon herself to tell these truths. The petition itself details an overview of Prince and the subsequent ownership of John Wood and the marriage to Daniel James. The petition concludes with the refusal of Wood's to grant:

…that the Petitioner's master has offered to send her back in his brig to the West Indies, to work in the yard; that the Petitioner expressed her desire to return to the West Indies, but not as a slave, and has entreated her master to sell her, her freedom on account of her services as a nurse to his child, but he has refused and still does refuse; further stating the particulars of her case; and praying the House to take the same into their consideration, and to grant such relief as to them may, under the circumstances, appear right. Ordered, That the said Petition do lie upon the Table. (Ferguson 127-128)

This was a salient fact that was presented at the trial. The resulting twist put on by Wood gave another view that helped to sway one of the court decisions.

There were two prongs to the attack on Prince’s character. They used witnesses to build up the Wood’s as caring slave owners while portraying Prince in a darker light. In the opening of the trial Wood is portrayed as honorable:

The plaintiff (Mr. John Adams Wood) was a proprietor of slaves, and one who wished for their emancipation as much as the Anti-Slavery Society, or any other persons, could do; at the same time he entertained an opinion, in common with
many others, that to effect an emancipation suddenly would be productive of nothing but ruin both—masters and slaves. (Ferguson 140)

The case that Woods brought used any and all bias that could be contrived for the purpose of upgrading the notion of his disposition. One witness for Wood offered, “The general conduct of Mr. Wood toward his slaves was everything that was kind, and Mrs. Wood appeared to be of a very mild temper. Witnesses never knew of any instance of Mr. Wood flogging his slaves” (Ferguson 142). There were other facts that did come out in the trial. The benevolence of Wood is contradicted by two witnesses: “Mr. H. W. Ravenscroft, and attorney, stated that in 1829 he made an application to the plaintiff to manumit Mary Prince, which he refused. Money was offered, but the plaintiff refused on any terms; and said he would not move a finger for her” (Ferguson 148). The refutation is evident throughout the trial. The fact that Prince did request an official manumit is not in dispute, nor is the refusal. There were points of refutation: “Susan Brown, a sister-in-law of Mary Prince, stated that she had examined her person, and found many marks of wounds upon her. She was as active as her state would allow, but she was so ill as to be hardly able to do any work” (Ferguson 148). There are many instances of gainsay on both sides of the case. The second apportioned but associated attack was on the morality of her character.

Depravity. It is defined by the Oxford Online English Dictionary as “Perversion of the moral faculties; corruption, viciousness, abandoned wickedness” (“Depravity, def. 2”). This word is used to describe Prince on several occasions in the court documents of the libel case of Wood versus Pringle. In giving credence to the reasoning of depriving Prince of her freedom through manumission, “One of the reasons was the alleged depravity of Mary Prince, to which it was said Mr. Dyer, a magistrate, of Antigua, was able to speak; but passage relating an instance
of the girl’s depravity was omitted in the pamphlet, and the plaintiff’s statement was treated as untrue” (Ferguson 141). Later in the court records it is stated, “The plaintiff’s letter to the Secretary of the Governor of Antigua was put in and read. It stated that Mary Prince’s moral character was very bad, as the police records would show, and charged her with an act of gross indecency as proof of her immoral conduct” (Ferguson 148). I contend the clear aim of this statement and others are to extract Prince’s agency and credibility. The language used was successful in its desired result: “Sir JAMES SCARLETT then addressed the jury in reply. He contended that the testimony of Mary Prince was exaggerated, and did not go to destroy the positive testimony of the plaintiff’s witnesses. Verdict for the plaintiff on the whole issues—Damages 25” (Ferguson 149). Thomas Pringle lost this, won his libel case and Mary Prince’s body was as it stood.

There is contention by some to do with Prince's body. Barbara Baumgartner cites the direct physicality endured by Prince at the hands of male and female owners, her physical limitations because of her enslavement, abuse, and her work. These abuses caught up to her, and by the time she got to England, the rheumatism had caught up with her. Prince’s primary job was to wash, and as she tells in her narrative, the pain of her ailments possessed her:

The doctor had told my mistress long before I came from the West Indies, that I was a sickly body and the washing did not agree with me, but Mrs. Wood would not release me from the tub, so I was forced to do as I could… When I complained to my mistress of this, she only got into a passion as usual, and said washing in hot water could not hurt anyone; - that I was lazy and insolent, and I 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. (Prince 32)
It is very soon after this that she takes her freedom with the abolitionists and Thomas Pringle. Prince’s physical abuse would soon be ending while the former physiological and sexual abuse would stay with her while the specific sexual details would stay out of the narrative.

The body and the "…highly sexualized…” (Baumgartner 254) aspect of Prince's body has many points brought out by Glover and Baumgartner. The sexual horrors of slavery, including sexual abuse inflicted upon women, are documented elsewhere and are suspiciously absent with Prince. There is, however, a code of the abuse; the censor laws were strict in England: "- 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 20). There are many instances of the masters and mistresses beating Prince while she was naked. Prince herself describes treatment that caused her more traumatic mental abuse as well: “He had an ugly fashion of stripping himself quite naked and ordering me then to wash him in a tub of water. This was the worse to me than all the licks. Sometimes when he called me to wash him I could not come, my eyes were so full of shame. He would then come to beat me” (Prince 24). Prince is giving an instance of sexual and mental abuse. The details are not there in the graphic physical description; they are evident in illustrative emotional words and feelings that Prince gives for these searing memories.

The fact that Prince was an expert from her direct experience only adds to her agency in the matter, no matter the consequences. She had a voice and a choice. One contributing factor in the loss of her voice is attributed to Prince being a conduit for the abolitionists. Allen, Glover, and Merinda K. Simmons spend a lot of time discussing what they view as mimicking abolitionist rhetoric. Some scholars and critics at the time assume that Prince would recite anything to achieve her goal of freedom. Prince was free, however. Prince's ability to go home
to her husband was damaged by the narrative. Her most recent owners, the Woods, were not going to be convinced to accept manumission in freeing Prince and never did. Prince first broached the subject of manumission when they were still living in Antigua after her marriage to Daniel James in 1826. It was then she approached the Woods having worked and saved money on her own time: “I was earnest in the request to my owners, but their hearts were hard – too hard to consent. Mrs. Wood was very angry – she grew quite outrageous – she called me a black devil and asked me who had put freedom into my head. ‘To be free is very sweet,’ I said: but she took good care to keep me a slave. I saw her change colour, and I left the room” (Prince 31).

This fact never changed in Prince's life. She was free in England, and it was sweet, but if she were to set foot in Antigua, she would legally be a slave. This was a bitter pill for Prince. The bravery she shows in articulating her story has only enhanced the validity. Ignoring the repercussions of her actions in narrating the horrors of her slave life, she lessened the chance of her ultimate freedom at home with her husband. The uniqueness of the voice of Mary Prince is highlighted by the ability to think beyond herself and the reverberation that could follow her putting herself out there. The chances of her ultimate freedom back home in Antigua were slim at best. This sliver was eliminated by the publication of the narrative.

The positive for Prince was she was using her voice even with the repercussions associated with putting herself out there. Prince's personal goal was to get back to Antigua and her husband. The publication of her narrative did the opposite and she knew that. Her overall goal was achieving freedom for all slaves in the West Indies. Mary Jeanne Larrabee views Prince's agency as a powerful tool in having an impact on her authorial potency. Larrabee shows Prince's pursuit of knowledge, as she puts in the title of her article, "Mary Prince's Epistemology of Resistance." Prince was indeed seeking knowledge to aid her in obtaining her freedom. It is
the way that Prince went about trying to secure her freedom that Larrabee establishes. The nuances that are uncovered by Larrabee demonstrate that Prince is indeed complex. Her constant acquisition of knowledge gives her voice and agency:

What exists inextricably within her voice is her complex individuality in the face of a hegemonic and disempowering social-cultural institution aimed at marking her only as ‘slave.’ Yet her individuality marks her as ‘human,’ as ‘literate,’ and thereby indeed as ‘civilized’—all things that her construction as slave supposedly ruled out. I will specifically argue how her complex individuality is woven with knowledge and epistemology that likewise was ruled out. (Larrabee 454)

Prince herself talks about acquiring knowledge as part of who she was. It was the epistemology that Prince used and the symbolism of her being human. Her first chance at receiving knowledge not meant for a slave was from Miss Fanny, while she was on loan from Mrs. Williams at about the age of twelve. Miss Fanny would receive instruction, and "...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" (Prince 9). Prior to her marriage in 1826, she was able to have lessons from the Moravian ladies (Prince 29). She had to keep this secret from her mistress. The thirst for knowledge is part of what Larrabee mentions in Prince securing her agency. As an enslaved woman of color, Prince alone can convey the narrative as no one else had at that point, drawing on her experience, race, and gender.

Paquet argues that the classic oral tradition Prince uses in her work gives validity to her voice. Paquet, Baumgartner, Maddison-MacFadyen, along with Larrabee, all state in varying degrees that experience is no substitute for editing. The voice comes through. Larrabee in particular shows that Prince was in a unique position because of her gender and race. This is
what is needed to give that agency and voice that has been discussed. I believe there was indeed a part of being a voice for the abolitionist movement; the narrative was written for a reason. Larrabee notes her knowledge: "Her telling of the life she lived as a slave and her living of that life as told both show her understanding of the constituted identities placed upon her by racist and patriarchal institutions and their agents" (Larrabee 459). There are many examples of Prince’s acknowledging that she is addressing the people of England with her narrative and personal plight:

Oh the horrors of slavery! – How the thought of it pains my heart! But the truth ought to be told of it; and what my eyes have seen I think it is my duty to relate; for few people in England know what slavery is. I have been a slave – I have felt what a slave feels, and I know what a slave knows; and I would have all the good people in England to know it too, that they may break our chains, and set us free. (Prince 21)

The imagery that Prince uses is not just visual in its use. The reader feels on a tactile level the pain she is feeling. While Prince was not literally in chains, the metaphor stands; she was not free. Prince wants to let the people of England to be aware of the horrors of slavery. The critics that give less due to the narratives are Allen and Simmons. Simmons notes that Prince would not have written it if she had not been in England, and Allen speaks about the omission of the repetition, stating there should have been more of the repetition beyond that what is in the narrative already.

The horrors of slavery are elicited in The History of Mary Prince a West Indian Slave; Related by Herself. The contention is brought out by the critics. The agency and authenticity of Mary Prince shines through and is not diminished with the proper view. These critics, whether
in 1831 or in 2019, are reading with different lenses. The true story can only be brought out by Mary Prince. As Anne B, Dobie states, "Because it is impossible to maintain pure objectivity in the examination of history, historians are obligated to acknowledge the biases that are likely to color their interpretations" (Dobie 182). The questions of validity arise directly from Pringle's editing. There critics question the repetition, body representation, and perceived bias by abolitionists. This narrative was indeed written for a purpose. The purpose during this time was the emancipation of slaves in British-held territories. At the time of Prince's publication, there was nothing more controversial than slavery and the abolitionist movement. Human nature can be looked at in a positive and a negative way. With a subject so powerful, the narrator, in this case, Prince, in the West African tradition of orally relating her story, has used her knowledge, power through experience, and voice attained through her earned agency, to advocate for the enslaved people of the West Indies. Her unique position as a female slave receiving freedom in England and wanting to convey her story gives absolute credence to her words. All of this I have argued she did with an eye towards helping other slaves while personally hurting her chances of a return to her home and her husband. Mary Prince was using her experience, heart, and voice to give the people of England who were on the fence of being pro-slavery or abolitionists an idea of these horrors that were happening, just not in front of their eyes. Prince concludes her narrative with an impassioned plea to the English people, leaving no doubt about the plight of the slaves overseas: "This is slavery. I tell it, to let English people know the truth; and I hope they will never leave off to pray God, and call loud to the great King of England, till all the poor blacks to be given free, and slavery done up for evermore" (Prince 38). The evidence given has given credence to Prince's voice; the detail and even the repetition that she gives in the narrative leaves the discerning eye to receive Prince’s message. The message comes through clear and
undistorted because of the agency earned by Mary Prince. Those with a judicious assessment see the clarity; those with and undiscerning sentiment have a murkier predisposed vision.
Works Cited


