



## **The Heartbeat of a West Indian Slave: The History of Mary Prince**

Sandra Pouchet Paquet

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# The Heartbeat of a West Indian Slave: *The History of Mary Prince*

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Issues of voice and identity are complex in *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, Related by Herself*, since the circumstances governing the textual production of Mary Prince's narrative unquestionably altered her individual authorial voice. The text is a conventional slave narrative in content, theme, and form<sup>1</sup>; it bears some resemblance to cases of slave abuse reported in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* around the time of its publication in London in 1831<sup>2</sup>; it is also autobiography.<sup>3</sup> Unable to purchase her freedom from her owner, Prince dictated her life story to Susanna Strickland, a recent convert to Methodism, a guest in the Pringle household, and a poet in her own right.<sup>4</sup> Her narrative was edited for publication as an anti-slavery tract by Thomas Pringle, her benefactor, employer, and publisher, and Secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society.<sup>5</sup> Social and religious prohibitions surrounding sexually explicit material in nineteenth-century Britain,<sup>6</sup> and legal liabilities attached to the publication of such tracts,<sup>7</sup> placed further constraints on Mary Prince's individual voice. Yet her narrative retains a qualitative uniqueness that is distinctly West Indian, distinctly a black woman's, and distinctly a slave's.

While Prince's original language is partially lost in translation from an oral to a written text, what remains is an authorial voice that fuses the public self-consciousness of the slave narrative with the private self-consciousness of the slave. The central focus of her narrative is slavery as a lived historical reality. But Mary Prince is as much the subject of her narrative as slavery is. The two levels of discourse are woven with rare configurational power. Prince is no "neutral passive recorder but rather a creative active shaper" (Olney 47) of her life story. The narrative's sharp exterior focus on slavery coincides with the personal and the interior, for slavery is the determinant of consciousness and the crucible of conscience in Mary Prince's life. Her narrative occupies private and public spheres simultaneously. She uses her individual life story to establish and validate a slave's point of view. Through her distinct voice, the slave narrative as evidence of victimization and document of legal history, is transformed into a triumphant narrative of emergent West Indian subjectivity in the gendered space of a black woman and a slave.<sup>8</sup>

The specific historicity of the slave narrative makes it an ideal forum for the public self-consciousness of the West Indian slave. In Mary Prince's narrative, historical time is localized in the specific details of her birth, her life, and her vision of the future. Her individual life story becomes public, historical, and national. It is shaped in the real historical time of a changing world, and she is in the vanguard of those changes. Prince's private story of victimization and survival, her heroic dream of safety for herself and

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**Sandra Pouchet Paquet** is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania, where she teaches courses in African-American and Caribbean literature. She is the author of *The Novels of George Lamming* and is writing a book on West Indian autobiography.

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her community, assimilates real historical time and projects an image of the black West Indian emerging in national-historical time.<sup>9</sup> Her private biographical future is linked to the historical future of her "own country" (82), telling her life story is a civic and political act that links Prince's individual quest for freedom as a black West Indian woman to the revolutionary restructuring of West Indian society: "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" (64). In linking her individual life and story to the unmaking of slavery and to the emergence of a new world, Mary Prince becomes an active agent of her society's transformation.<sup>10</sup> In the context of the region's historical quest for freedom and independence, her contextualized and transformed literate voice emerges as a gender-specific, all-inclusive ancestral voice.

Mary Prince's narrative reveals a profound identification with the West Indies as a territorial cradle.<sup>11</sup> The trope of return to one's native land is fully formed here as a return to the West Indies—past, present, and future.<sup>12</sup> Prince is a West Indian slave born of slaves; her estranged past and necessary future are located geographically and historically in the West Indies. England is a means to an end; it is not the fulfilment of her dream of freedom, as it is in *The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, and the "Narrative of Louis Asa-Asa, A Captured African." Bermuda is her "native place" (66, 67). In contrast to her owner's assertion that Prince is "not a native" of Antigua, and he knows of "no relation she has here" (90), Prince, exiled in England, refers to Antigua as her "own country" where "all old friends and connections are" (82). Her narrative focuses on the West Indies as the necessary site of self-identification and self-fulfil-

ment in anticipation of the historical changes emancipation will bring. White West Indians who would maintain slavery are "the foreign people" (83), as she presses her competing claim as a black West Indian and slave. To be West Indian, in Mary Prince's terms, is more than to make your money there, or to be born there and long for affiliation with either Europe or Africa. It is to position yourself self-consciously at the juncture of slavery and freedom, and to link your individual life story to the emergence of a new world in the Caribbean.

Mary Prince's slave narrative brings into sharp focus formative issues surrounding subjectivity and the engendering of national identity in preeminent texts of West Indian autobiography.<sup>13</sup> A theory of the self is crafted here that projects the female autobiographical consciousness as historically aware, resistant, and sympathetically engaged with an oppressed slave majority in the region of her birth.<sup>14</sup> It defines female subjectivity in national-historical terms. The public self-consciousness of the female slave there is not only about the empowering of women; it is also about the liberation of the whole society.<sup>15</sup> Self-consciousness is engendered by consciousness of others. The tortured body of a female slave speaks through and on behalf of the tortured bodies of men and women and children alike. Old Daniel's sufferings on Turk's Island (64) are as important as old Sarah's (65), pregnant "Aunt" Hetty's (57), and the daily torture of the two little slave boys, the mulatto Cyrus and the African Jack (56). Interiority is expressed in connectedness to the collective human community.<sup>16</sup>

What distinguishes Mary Prince's public accounting of self is the degree and quality of its interiority, its attention to the cultural systems that nurture a human community under seige, and her unshakable confidence in the future of the West Indies as place to live and love and work.<sup>17</sup>

Mary Prince's narrative modulates between an aggressive assertion of self as an uncompromising arbiter of value on behalf of an oppressed community and a longing for reconnection with an ideal Caribbean community. It is an ideal, as Thomas Pringle's Supplement informs us, that would restore a freedom-loving heart and a broken body to the safety and security of a loving husband in a West Indian landscape. It is charged with the necessity for radical social change.

I would rather go into my grave than go back a slave to Antigua, though I wish to go back to my husband very much—very much—very much! I am much afraid my owners would separate me from my husband, and use me very hard, or perhaps sell me for a field negro;—and slavery is too bad. I would rather go into my grave! (86)

The site of resistance and identification for Mary Prince is the creative juncture of distinct spheres of existence; Mary Prince as literary subject of her own narrative is legally free in England and legally a slave in the English colony that is her home in the Caribbean. Her creative initiative is self-derived. The slave narrative as autobiography shapes a unity of being beyond the marginalization and alienation imposed by slavery and colonialism. "The idea of writing Mary Prince's history was first suggested by herself" (45). Her individual voice refocuses the public debate on slavery in a language specific to herself and to her West Indian world. She adds her speaking voice to the propaganda war being waged in print and makes permanent the foundations of a roots-derived national self-consciousness in West Indian autobiography.

Transcribed, pruned and edited for publication, Mary Prince's speaking voice, transformed into a literate text, prefigures narrational aspects of primary autobiographical texts in modern Caribbean writing.<sup>18</sup> It stands at the crossroads of "the black vernac-

ular and the literate white text, of the spoken and written word, of oral and printed forms of literary discourse" (Gates 131).<sup>19</sup> It is a site of resistance and accommodation among different traditions, languages, and cultures, between Europe and Africa in the Caribbean and in Great Britain, and between colony and metropolis. The common bond of sympathy that engages the polyphonic arrangement of the text is the unmaking of slavery as a legally sanctioned social and economic institution. This is the forum that both defines the limits of, and gives Mary Prince the freedom to tell, her own story. *The History of Mary Prince* is remarkable, in that it both uses and privileges a black West Indian speaking voice in a legal and literary context that effectively redefines who and what it means to be West Indian in the production of literature in 1831.<sup>20</sup> It makes explicit the interdependence of consciousness that characterizes the production of written texts of West Indian literature, which is still largely dependent on extra-territorial, metropolitan publishers for publication and distribution.

*The History of Mary Prince* follows James Olney's "Master Plan for Slave Narratives" (50-51) quite faithfully. Mary's name is changed from her slave name, Mary, Princess of Wales, to Mary Prince, her paternal slave name (74).<sup>21</sup> The title page includes the claim "Related by Herself." The Preface by Thomas Pringle testifies to the truthfulness and authenticity of the narrative:

The narrative was taken down from Mary's own lips . . . . It was written out fully, and with all the narrator's repetitions and prolixities, and afterwards pruned into its present shape; retaining, as far as was practicable, Mary's exact expressions and peculiar phraseology. No fact of importance has been omitted, and not a single circumstance or sentiment has been added. It is essentially her own, without any material alteration farther than was requisite to exclude redun-

dances and gross grammatical errors, so as to render it clearly intelligible.

Pringle assumes personal responsibility for the veracity of the narrative. He is explicit about his cross-examination of Mary "on every fact and circumstance detailed" (45) and the methods of external verification he employs.

Mary's narrative is followed by a "Supplement to the History of Mary Prince By the Editor," which summarizes the legal debate and the humanitarian issues surrounding Mary's struggle to be legally free, not only in England, but in Antigua.<sup>22</sup> In the Supplement and Appendices to the text, the editor provides corroborative evidence from letters, newspaper items, and cases reported in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*; testimonials; and other documentary material. Pringle even includes the short narrative of a young African, Louis Asa-Asa, who was kidnapped, sold into slavery, and brought to England. In a Postscript to the second edition, Thomas Pringle solicits funds on Mary Prince's behalf. He reports that her health is failing, and they have been unsuccessful in buying her freedom from the Woods. Temporary manumission in England threatens to make her exile from home a permanent condition. In an Appendix to the third edition, Mrs. Pringle, Susanna Strickland, Mrs. Pringle's sister Susan Brown, and a friend Martha Browne offer eyewitness testimony of "the marks of former ill-usage" on Mary's body (119). These heteroglot voices compete with but do not dominate Mary Prince's fully integrated sense of self in relation to the community that engenders her sense of identity.<sup>23</sup>

Mary Prince's narrative begins conventionally: "I was born at Brack-

ish-Pond, in Bermuda, on a farm belonging to Mr. Charles Myners." She does not give the date of her birth,<sup>24</sup> but she knows where she was born and she knows her parents.<sup>25</sup> "My mother was a household slave; and my father, whose name was Prince, was a sawyer belonging to Mr. Trimmingham, a shipbuilder at Crow-

Lane" (47). The specific historicity of her narrative is established immediately. She gives a brief account of her happy childhood and contrasts it with a heart-wrenching account of the slave auction that separates her from her mother and her siblings, of her mother's grief and the children's distress as they are forcibly separated at a public market in the middle of the street in Hamble Town. Her narrative describes the brutality and cruelty of her masters and mistresses, Captain Wil-

liams, Captain and Mrs. I—, Mr. D— and his overseer son Master Dickey, and, finally, Mr. and Mrs. Wood. She gives specific information about the working conditions of household slaves and slaves employed in the salt works of Turks Island. She describes the paucity of food, clothing, and health care, as well as the kind of work required of slaves in her circumstances.

Prince portrays herself as extraordinarily hard working, resourceful, and progressively resistant. Her plans to escape revolve around attempts to buy her freedom, and her narrative is punctuated with reflections on the evils of slavery that underscore the polemical nature of the text. For example,

I wish I could find words to tell you all I then felt and suffered. The great God above alone knows the thoughts of the poor slave's heart, and the bitter pains which follow such separations as these. All that

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territorial  
cradle.**

we love taken away from us—oh, it is sad, sad! and sore to be borne!  
(51)

She gives an account of how she comes to leave the Woods household in England and seek the help of the Anti-Slavery Society in securing her freedom. And she proposes the collaborative effort that will give her oral text the power and authority of print capitalism, when it becomes clear that the Woods will not agree to sell her at any price.<sup>26</sup>

Mary Prince seems unthreatened by the collective act of telling, writing, editing, and publishing her story which, in the oral tradition of storytelling, is infinitely repeatable. She entrusts her speaking voice to her white amanuensis in a spirit of friendship and trust<sup>27</sup>: "I will say the truth to the English people who may read this history that my good friend, Miss S—, is now writing down for me" (84). The power of her words is oral and familial; writing is what other people do. Her narrative reveals none of the preciousness about individual voice that characterizes the professional writer in our time. Her speaking voice has its own preeminent validity. Her narrative is crafted in full self-consciousness that "oral and written traditions comprise separate and distinct discursive universes" (Gates 132), and she seizes on the overlap of intention between both worlds as a site of creation rather than conflict.

Though intent on having her story recorded and published, Mary Prince is not in awe of the book as a means of achieving presence and legitimacy. Reverence for the book is reserved for "the word of God," but conversion to Christianity comes late to Mary Prince and is only one facet of self-definition. Typically, she struggles "to know the truth" rather than simply to accept the teachings Mrs. Pringle and Mr. Mortimer (82-83). Reading and letters are part of the fabric of her "happy" childhood. They are evoked as evidence of equality

and intimacy in her relations with 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 . . . . 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)

As an adult she is eager to attend the Moravian school where she is taught to read. "In this class there were all sorts of people, old and young, grey headed folks and children; but most of them were free people" (73). She emphasizes her own quickness and social interaction in a community of free blacks. Literacy is the privilege of the free and facilitates conversion to Christianity, but Prince pays far more attention to the economics of buying her freedom than to achieving literacy.<sup>28</sup> In a paragraph that begins, "The way in which I made my money was this," she takes time to explain how she earned her money as evidence of her work ethic, her honesty, and her determination "by all honest means, to earn money to buy my freedom" (71). Literacy is not celebrated as having a necessary relation to the achievement of freedom in her West Indian world, though her life story is crafted in full self-consciousness of print-capitalism as a way of winning English hearts and minds in the struggle to abolish slavery (58, 64, 84).

Voice is already fully formed within the context of her own expressive culture when Mary Prince asks to have her story written down. Her narrative recapitulates the emergence of an historically aware, resistant voice as a facet of her quest for freedom. There are many examples of a sophisticated, controlling voice already in place both in the West Indies and in England. As a child of twelve, she takes her cue from her father, who ad-

monishes her master for his brutality, and denounces Capt. I— herself (60). Later, when she returns to Bermuda with Mr. D—, she reprimands him for his violence and indecency and refuses to be his sexual slave any longer (67-68). Her departure from the Woods' household in England is a particularly rich example of her preemptive verbal skills<sup>29</sup>:

"Stop, before you take this trunk, and hear what I have to say before these people. I am going out of this house, as I was ordered; but I have done no wrong at all to my owners, neither here nor in the West Indies. I always worked very hard to please them, both by night and day; but there was no giving satisfaction, for my mistress could never be satisfied with reasonable service. I told my mistress I was sick, and yet she has ordered me out of doors. This is the fourth time; and now I am going out." (80)

She seizes on the fact that the Woods ordered her out of their house, and repeats and refashions this into a public speech of recrimination and justification. She transforms their private space into a public space in a speech act that parodies their ownership in a series of verbal assaults. Whether you call it "signifying" (USA) or "ramachez" (Trinidad), such a speech performance is a ritual feature of black talk, and Mary Prince is a practiced performer. Though print-capitalism shapes autobiographical self-consciousness in Prince's narrative, voice and identity are already in place when she decides that she must go public in England with her story.

Whatever the degree of authorial control Mary Prince exercised over the published narrative, her voice is a privileged one in the text as a whole, and it speaks out of a distinct West Indian particularity. The tone and style of her narrative are oral and familial as she fashions an epic tale of bondage and deliverance into an elaborate metaphor of the self.<sup>30</sup> Though it is more than a century since her story

was first recorded, edited, and published, a West Indian turn of phrase and style of telling a story is still very much in evidence. Beyond this, the structure of the narrative calls attention to the internal dialogism of Prince's discourse on self and slavery, which is not only responsive to scribe and audience, but to a chorus of West Indian voices who provide an apperceptive background of understanding within the narrative itself. The force, passion, and craft of Prince's narrative is to be understood in the context of the expressive resources of the black West Indian community at home as well as in the context provided by the generic features of the slave narrative and autobiography.<sup>31</sup>

In her narrative, Mary Prince uses direct and reported speech to create the background necessary for her own voice. She repeats and refashions the words of resistance that are the legacy of her own community, giving special attention to the words of love and support from her mother, her father, and her husband. Self is crafted in dialogue with the voices of fellow slaves and the voices of the world that opposes it. The dialogic structure of her narrative is closely intertwined with the performance-oriented, storytelling aspects of her narrative. As in any well-told story throughout the West Indies, she gives direct speech to her characters to highlight a conflict, to give depth and tone to a character, or for dramatic emphasis. William L. Andrews calls attention to the novelization of slave narratives of the 1850s and 1860s in the concluding chapter of *To Tell a Free Story*. In the case of Mary Prince, these narrative techniques are already in place as part of a highly developed oral tradition of storytelling and signifying of one sort or another. She uses direct speech to communicate the calculated cruelty of Capt. I—, who whips her to the point of insensibility when she is a child of twelve: ". . . giving me several heavy blows with his hand, he said, 'I shall

come home to-morrow morning at twelve, on purpose to give you a round hundred.' He kept his word— Oh sad for me!" (58). When Mr. Wood hears of her marriage to Daniel James, a free black tradesman, he flies into a rage and sends for her husband. She uses direct speech to convey Daniel's provocative use of irony and her pleasure in the memory: "My husband said, 'Sir, I am a free man, and thought I had a right to choose a wife; but if I had known Molly was not allowed to have a husband, I should not have asked her to marry me'" (74-75).

She also interrupts her narrative with emotive and evocative apostrophes, philosophical reflections, and moral lessons, and she does this in full self-consciousness of the process of organizing a narrative to specific ends:

I lay down at night and rose up in the morning in fear and sorrow; and often wished that like poor Hetty I could escape from this cruel bondage and be at rest in the grave. But the hand of that God whom then I knew not, was stretched over me; and I was mercifully preserved for better things. 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. But I must go on with the thread of my story. (57-58)

The "thread of my story" evokes Anansi, the spider-hero of the Akans, who emerges as trickster hero and legendary spinner of tales throughout the West Indies. Iteratives like *weep, weep, weep; clatter, clatter, clatter; and work, work, work* appear throughout the narrative, and are a distinctive feature of West Indian speech. Iteratives are often used for dramatic emphasis. Prince also uses customary, poetic turns of phrase that are characteristic of West Indian speech, for example, the use of *salt water* for tears: "Oh, the trials! the trials! they make the salt water come into my eyes when I think

of the days in which I was afflicted" (54).

Despite the socially and historically imposed limits placed on her individual authorial voice, Mary Prince grounds her narrative in the discursive world of the vernacular and the community that shaped it. This gives her public account of self a cultural coherence beyond the verbal-ideological coherence of the text as a whole. Indeed, the use of a modified vernacular that preserves the tone and style of the original is now commonplace in modern Caribbean writing, but in 1831 this represents an extraordinary harmony of intention.

Mary Prince and her editor resist the psychic distancing William Andrews describes in *To Tell a Free Story* (62-66). 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. In a note to the concluding paragraph of Prince's narrative, he insists that "the whole of this paragraph especially, is given as nearly as was possible in Mary's precise words" (83). He is committed to Mary Prince's veracity and individuality. She is a "fellow-mortal," "a poor Negro-woman" (93), "perfectly honest and trustworthy in all respects," and she "is remarkable for *decency* and *propriety* of conduct—and her *delicacy*" (105). Thomas Pringle makes no pretense of neutrality. Her master Mr. Wood is characterized as un-Christian and inhumane; he is "unreasonable" (87), "unconscionable" (89), a liar (95-96), and unscrupulous (98). When Thomas Pringle points out the faults of Mary Prince in the context of a Victorian ideal of true womanhood, they are "a somewhat violent and hasty temper, and a considerable share of natural pride and self-importance." But these observations are minimized and subordinated to her "considerable natural sense" and her "quickness of observa-



tion and discrimination of character" (105).

One might argue that the privileging of the voice of Mary Prince in this text is fundamental to the pseudo-legal/criminal nature of the slave narrative. The primacy of the embodied voice of Mary Prince is not gratuitously given by Thomas Pringle, who undertakes to transform her oral narrative into a literate text and publish it with supporting documents. The text is contingent upon the eyewitness testimony of Mary Prince; the real authority of the text originates in her autobiographical consciousness. In the public space of the slave narrative Mary Prince, through self-revelation, lays bare for public scrutiny the criminality of slave owners and the legal system which endorses their conduct. And she does this with the extraordinary facility of one completely at ease with a variety of storytelling and oratorical skills. The victim of the slave auction, a public space that allows the slave no voice and no privacy, recasts herself as witness, judge, and evaluator, as well as victim and survivor.<sup>32</sup> Once relegated to the margins of consciousness in the marketplace, Mary Prince makes the essential humanity of the slave audible and visible in the competing public space provided by the slave narrative as autobiography.

The configurational and episodic center of Prince's public account of self is the body of a female slave. Once pressed aside to the margins of consciousness by the institution of slavery, that body now occupies a central place and speaks out of a pronounced sense of ethnic and racial solidarity. The body of the slave once again occupies a public space, but this time it is on Mary Prince's initiative. The relationship between private and public selves is not the alienation and

marginalization of the auction block but the recovery and the recreation of community. "I was born" is no mere surface formula for testifying to the horrors of slavery. It is the context for knowing and understanding self. It establishes the fundamentals of her

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voice and identity, in time and space, on private and public levels. Mary Prince shapes her narrative to a pattern of developing public consciousness in a journey from the unconsciousness and illusory happiness of childhood in slavery; through a brutal awakening to the realities of slavery, and progressive stages of resistance and redefinition; to temporary manumission and self-defi-

nition. Her journey from slavery to freedom, from childhood to womanhood, from Bermuda to England, is a journey from the private self-consciousness of a child to the politicized, public self-consciousness of an enslaved woman speaking on behalf of all slaves. It is both linear and cyclic. The journey's end is a story of return to her West Indian beginnings.

Mary Prince's movement from one sphere of experience to another is a process of growth and development embodied in a sequence of events that simultaneously characterizes different aspects of slavery and critical periods of interior growth in her life. Each event adds new dimensions to private and public contexts of her individual story. The episode in which she intervenes to stop Mr. D— from brutally beating his daughter in a drunken fury testifies to the depravity of the slave owner. It also testifies to an increasingly defiant and politically aware Mary Prince, who acts independently and on principle, and redefines herself in the process. "The people gave me credit for getting her away" (67), she explains. She is no longer a victim struggling to survive mentally

and physically; she is a woman with a superior sense of social responsibility who puts herself at risk in an attempt to change the circumstances that oppress the household:

He turned around and began to lick me. Then I said: "Sir, this is not Turk's Island." I can't repeat his answer, the words were too wicked—too bad to say. He wanted to treat me the same in Bermuda as he had done in Turk's Island. (67)

She takes her principled rebellion a step further when she refuses to bathe her master Mr. D— any longer:

He had an ugly fashion of stripping himself quite naked and ordering me then to wash him in a tub of water. . . . at last I defended myself, for I thought it was high time to do so. 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)

Mary Prince not only gives a specific example of the sexual abuse and debauchery of the slave owner, she also gives evidence of the emergence of a new Mary Prince after her return to Bermuda from Turk's Island.

The new Mary Prince speaks and acts on her own behalf and on behalf of another woman in pain, even though that other woman is a mistress and an oppressor. She thinks and acts out of a set of values different to those sanctioned by colonial slavery and redefines herself in the process. She silences Mr. D— in her account of the incident: "I can't repeat his answer the words were too wicked—too bad to say" (67). Her authority derives from the high moral ground that distinguishes this victim's eye witness account. She speaks and acts to silence and curb the actions of a cruel and abusive slave master. She forms new alliances by gaining public recognition. She formulates plans of her own and carries them out. She is the instigator of her own sale to the Woods when she hears that the Woods are

going to Antigua: "I felt a great wish to go there, and I went to Mr. D— and asked him to let me go in Mr. Wood's service" (68). Ten years on Turk's Island have clarified and strengthened her political awareness and resistance. She has matured into a self-reliant, resourceful, active agent on her own behalf and on behalf of others. She is intent on changing her relationship to slavery and on changing the way the slave world operates.

The contradiction between physical enslavement and interior growth in Mary Prince's individual life provides a rhetorical unity beyond the temporal sequence of her narrative. Even on Turk's Island, where the ritual torture of slaves is constant, Mary's interior growth in awareness is an essential aspect of her prolonged ordeal. The interaction of slave and master on Turk's Island is linked to a heightened understanding of the social values engendered by slavery. When Old Daniel is tortured to death by Mr. D—, the experience is internalized: "He was an object of pity and terror to the whole gang of slaves, and in his wretched case we saw, each of us, our own lot, if we should live to be as old" (64). In a community of sufferers, concepts of guilt and innocence, crime and retribution, evil and good are clarified and strengthened with everyday use. As slavery grows incrementally more corrupt, the victim grows more discriminating about slavery's ramifications for slave and master. Prince describes Mr. D—'s son, Master Dickey, as a mirror image of his degenerate father: "I must say something more about this cruel son of a cruel father. — He had no heart—no fear of God; he had been brought up by a bad father in a bad path, and he delighted to follow in the same footsteps" (65).

In Mary Prince, the oppressiveness of colonial slavery engenders an increasingly aware resistant spirit, whose growth and development ironically represent the consolidation of

values generated in the "idyllic" landscape of her early childhood. The apparent contradiction between linear development in time and cyclic return to received values provides a complex image of the finely tuned balance between self and society in the oppressiveness of a British slave colony. The opening scenes provide an organizing center for point of view, a scale and background for depicting what follows. They tell of a continuity between the slave child's ideal world and the free woman's dream of safe return. Consciousness of freedom begins in childhood. "The tasks given out to us were light, and we used to play together with Miss Betsey, with as much freedom almost as if she had been our sister" (48). The illusory happiness of childhood is represented as the nucleus of freedom as a value. Values governing kinship and community formulated in childhood inform Mary Prince's evaluation of episodes that follow, even while she distances herself from the "foolish creature" (49) she was. Childhood is evoked as an enduring nucleus to which she returns for clarification of the self's true relationship to the world.<sup>33</sup>

The ironies of Mary Prince's childhood happiness establish scales of comparison for the entire narrative: "This was the happiest period of my life; for I was too young to understand rightly my condition as a slave, and too thoughtless and full of spirits to look forward to the days of toil and sorrow" (49). Prince self-consciously invokes time and memory as a way of highlighting and evaluating contrasting degrees of awareness, and also continuity. The interplay of two voices, crafted in an awareness of subjectivity as the creation of time and memory in a specific historical situa-

tion, is characteristic of the narrative as a whole. This is apparent, at the beginning of her narrative, in the ironic interplay of past and present, of *then* and *now*, values which change with growth and development in the course of her narrative.

Then, at the narrative's outset, is the innocence of childhood experienced as a nurturing community in which the distinctions between slave and owner are blurred; the experience of biological and slave family is remembered as one of giving and receiving love and affection. *Now* is the experience of brutal slavery that is consistently described in the contrasting terms of victimization and abuse and an ongoing violent onslaught on kinship, community, nurturance, and love. These are the values that dominate the self's ideal relationship to community in Mary Prince's

**In Mary Prince's narrative, conscience and consciousness coalesce in and around the heart, a center of life and value formulated in childhood.**

past, present, and future, formulated in an environment in which mutual affection and shared experience temporarily mask the horrors of slavery. Prince and her siblings are raised by their own mother under the direction of a "kind" mistress, Mrs. Williams, who is herself the victim of spousal abuse and neglect<sup>34</sup>: "My poor mistress bore his ill-treatment with great patience, and all her slaves loved and pitied her. I was truly attached to her, and next to my own mother, loved her better than any creature in the world." She recalls her acute distress when she is hired out to Mrs. Pruden as a nursemaid at the age of eleven in exchange for food and clothing: "I cried bitterly at parting with my dear mistress and Miss Betsey, and when I kissed my mother and brothers and sisters, I thought my young heart would break, it pained me so" (48). Yet Mary Prince describes her inden-

ture to Mrs. Pruden as an extension of Mrs. Williams's household. She forms deep attachments to the Pruden children in her care, while maintaining close contact with her biological and extended slave family.

Mary Prince initially constructs her interiority around reciprocal love, affection, duty, and childhood assumptions of equality in this nurturing community. The values of heart are the ones that are crafted here, heart as the moral and ethical as well as the emotional and physical center of self and community. "My heart always softens when I think of them" (49), she says of the Pruden children. The death of Mrs. Williams disassembles her known world utterly:

When I thought about my mistress I felt as if the world was all gone wrong; and for many days and weeks I could think of nothing else. I returned to Mrs. Pruden's; but my sorrow was too great to be comforted, for my own dear mistress was always in my mind. Whether in the house or abroad, my thoughts were always talking to me about her. (50)

The personal loss she feels is an occasion for further revelations of interiority: the self in dialogue with the self about lost innocence.

Within three months, Mary and two of her sisters are sold "to raise money" for Captain Williams's wedding (50). Her "happy" childhood comes to an abrupt and tragic end, but it is not erased as a value in her continuing life as a slave. The auction of Mary and her sisters is crafted as a site of resistance in defeat. It invokes a storm of protest from Mary Prince in retrospect, but, just as important, it is resisted vociferously by members of her biological and extended family as a betrayal of the values that govern the community where heart is formed. Memory, in dialogue with the primary voices of community, coalesces here in the recreated childhood of Mary Prince to reveal the sub-

stance of a resistant interiority formed in childhood and slavery. However wrong-minded her motives, Miss Betsey denounces her father's decision as illegal and wicked: "Oh, Mary! my father is going to sell you all to raise money to marry that wicked woman. You are *my* slaves, and he has no right to sell you; but it is all to please her" (50). The degree of her distress identifies a community of sympathy: "She could not bear to part with her old playmates and she cried sore and would not be pacified" (51). Mary's mother's resistance is conveyed in the memory of her mother's visible and audible expressions of grief. She conceptualizes the sale of her children as death.

The black morning at length came. . . . While putting on us the new osnaburgs in which we were to be sold, she said, in a sorrowful voice (I shall never forget it!), "See, I am *shrouding* my poor children; what a task for a mother!" (51)

She leaves Mary with an indelible sense of injustice done to her and her family: "I am going to carry my little chickens to market," (these were her very words) 'take your last look at them; may be you will see them no more' " (51). Her mother's words are recalled as a legacy of value that survives the passage of time. Resistance is fixed in memory as an immutable speech act, to which her psyche returns to recover and renew faith in self and community, in autobiography as slave narrative.

Mary's account of the auction moves back and forth between the outer and inner aspects of the sale. The auction takes place in the middle of the street in a public market. She is denied all privacy as she is "surrounded by strange men, who examined and handled me in the same manner that a butcher would a calf or a lamb he was about to purchase." Yet against the public humiliation of being offered "for sale like sheep or cattle" (52), the narrative zeros in on

the interior space of her degraded body, in a reflective and evaluative mode.

The site of interiority at this critical moment in her life is the heart<sup>35</sup>: "My heart throbbed with grief and terror so violently, that I pressed my hands quite tightly across my breast, but I could not keep it still, and it continued to leap as if it burst out of my body." Heart is the pulse beat of life itself. It registers grief and terror. It is individual and collective. "The pain that wrung the hearts of the negro woman and her young ones" is felt collectively. In the same narrative moment, heart is an alternative to the material measure of the marketplace as a measure of the moral and ethical sensibility that governs the well-being of individuals in society:

They were not all bad, I dare say, but slavery hardens white people's hearts towards the blacks; . . . their light words fell like cayenne on the fresh wounds of our hearts. Oh those white people have small hearts who can only feel for themselves. (52)

Slavery hardens white people's hearts and makes them egotistical and unfeeling. Conversely, in Mary Prince's public account of her life as a slave, heart is a center of resistant subjectivity and interiority. It is a specific image of values recovered and reimposed on childhood recollections that affirms the terms of the self's existence in and beyond time.

Her mother's parting admonishment as she mourns the loss of her children is "to keep up a good heart, and do our duty to our new masters" (53). When Mary Prince arrives at her new master's house, she receives a similar admonishment from two slave women who work there. " 'Poor child, poor child!' they both said; 'you must keep a good heart, if you are to live here' " (54). To keep a good heart is to be strong, resistant, and conscious of self-worth in the face of extraordinary torture and brutality; it is

moral and ethical conduct in an immoral and unjust world. It seizes the moral high ground. It is an individual and a collective state of mind. It is an ideology of survival and resistance. It is the well of being. It engenders a new literary tradition rooted in the values of a transplanted and transformed African community in the Caribbean.

Heart is a site of resistance specific to the bond of sympathy and solidarity between father and daughter when Mary's father removes her from the "hole in the rocks" (60) where her mother has hidden her and returns her to the brutal Capt. I—, the privateer and merchant who had beaten her to the point of insensibility. In an act of great love and courage, Mary's father censors and admonishes Capt. I— for his brutality:

"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 her heart. The sight of her wounds has nearly broke mine. — I entreat you for the love of God, to forgive her for running away, and that you will be a kind master to her in future."

Her father's act of courage does not soften Capt. I—'s hard heart, but his words empower his twelve-year-old daughter to speak up on her own behalf:

I then took courage and said that I could stand the floggings no longer; that I was weary of my life, and therefore I had run away to my mother; but mothers could only weep and mourn over their children, they could not save them from cruel masters—from the whip, the rope, and the cow-skin. (60)

Following her father's example, she is empowered to speak from a resistant heart as a primary site of self-identification and identification with others. She speaks for herself, her mother, and all enslaved mothers. Her recollections of childhood shape her slave's life to the enduring values of a mother's and father's value-affirming

love. Mother, father, siblings, and extended family are recalled as a permanent, unchanging source of the indestructible values of heart.

Mary Prince reproduces and revises images of the heart in an elaborate pattern of signification that reflects the myriad voices and values of the text as managed elements of her own voice and heart. It is her heart that resists the slave's status as marketable commodity: "Oh the Buckra people who keep slaves think that black people are like cattle, without natural affection. But my heart tells me it is far otherwise" (61). It is her heart that Mr. Mortimer seeks to capture for his God: "Mr. Mortimer tells me that he cannot open the eyes of my heart, but I must pray to God to change my heart . . ." Mr. Mortimer seeks to change her resistant heart to an accepting one; but she protests to the end: "I must confess, I find it a hard and heavy task to do so" (83).

The epic experience of the West Indian slave is compressed in the metaphor of the heart. The story of Mary Prince's scarred and broken body is one of humiliation and torment, a testament to the institutionalization of human greed and brutality in the British Empire. It is a body that knows tenderness and affection as well as violation, torture, and abuse. From the age of twelve until she leaves Antigua with the Woods for England, she is repeatedly stripped naked, suspended by her arms, and whipped until blood flows. Her body becomes the repository of the psychosexual neuroses of masters and mistresses alike. Her individual suffering is recorded in the context of similar terroristic acts of torture meted out to men, women, and children who are routinely stripped naked, suspended, and brutalized. The physical and psychological torture of a lifetime leaves her childless, crippled with arthritis, blind, and in exile. But her embattled body is the vessel of a defiant tribal spirit of resis-

tance that she refashions in memory and characterizes as heart. The fashioning of this trope as a center of value in her epic tale of bondage and deliverance is her own act of creative memory; its origins are oral and familial and illuminate the oral beginnings of West Indian culture in a community under seige. The body in pain is only spasmodically unconscious and inarticulate; lost consciousness returns to hone voice and conscience to the achievement of freedom for self and community. In Mary Prince's narrative, conscience and consciousness coalesce in and around the heart, a center of life and value formulated in childhood. The heart endures as a self-contained moral guide, invoking both self-reliance and shared community.

The interplay of memory, heart, and voice in the fashioning of individual and community values is the center of subjectivity and interiority in Mary Prince's public account of herself. The major cultural and political issues of West Indian autobiographical writing are inscribed here in core images of cultural and geographical rootedness in the Caribbean. The autobiographical act of self reading self is preeminently a literary act that uses the story of the self to advance social and political change. Interiority, as female subjectivity, is the springboard to an empowering resistance that represents the entire community; the essence of self is heart, a drumbeat sounding out of the communal heartland.<sup>36</sup> Mary Prince's autobiography is a precursive ancestral voice that delineates the essential tropes of return and self-parody in images shot through with the dialogic overtones of a community fashioning self out of resistance. Individual conscience and consciousness are fused as memory, heart, and voice to the freedom of an emergent West Indian and Caribbean community. Mary Prince's heart is the caged bird that sings the definitive song of freedom to let her people go.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>James Olney writes, "The theme is the reality of slavery and the necessity of abolishing it; the content is a series of events and descriptions that will make the reader see and feel the realities of slavery; and the form is a chronological, episodic narrative beginning with an assertion of existence and surrounded by various testimonial evidences for that assertion" (53).

<sup>2</sup>The *Reporter's* weekly accounts of such cases usually included details of the legal dispute, authenticating apparatus by eyewitnesses, details of trial testimony, numerous and hideous goings-on and occasional resistance, and some account of abolitionist activity" (Ferguson 25).

<sup>3</sup>I have in mind the fundamental distinction Olney makes: "... autobiography may be understood as a recollective/narrative act in which the writer, from a certain point in his [or her] life—the present—, looks back over the events of that life and recounts them in such a way as to show how that past history has led to this present state of being. Exercising memory, in order that he [or she] may recollect and narrate, the autobiographer is not a neutral and passive recorder but rather a creative and active shaper" (47).

<sup>4</sup>Susanna Strickland also recorded *The Narrative of Ashton Warner, A Native of St. Vincent's* (1831) in Pringle's house. Ashton Warner's voice is quite distinct in style and tone from Mary Prince's.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas Pringle was a published poet in his own right. He died in 1834. For more information about him, see Thomas Pringle, *His Life, Times, and Poems* (Cape Town: Juta, 1912); *The Poetical Works of Thomas Pringle. With a Sketch of His Life by Leigh Ritchie* (London, 1838); *Narrative of a Residence in South Africa, A New Edition, To Which is Prefixed a Biographical Sketch of the Author by Josiah Conder* (London, 1840); and John Robert Doyle, Jr., *Thomas Pringle* (New York: Twayne, 1972). My source for this information is Ferguson's excellent Introduction (38-40 n44 and 30-31 n15).

<sup>6</sup>Sexual activity is subject to conditioned and closeted expression in the text even though the sexual abuse of slaves is a distinctive feature of West Indian life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Ferguson 25). See *In Miserable Slavery*, edited by Douglass Hall, for a graphic account of sexual abuse. Frances Smith Foster considers sexual abuse and the impact of the nineteenth-century Cult of True Womanhood in "Adding Color and Contour to Early American Self-Portraiture" and also in *Witnessing Slavery* (108-09).

<sup>7</sup>Moir Ferguson explains that Mary's owner brought legal action against Thomas Pringle for publishing Mary Prince's *History*. In failing health and short of funds, he was unable to obtain legal evidence in support of her story from the West Indies and was forced to pay damages. Pringle did not have the support of the Anti-Slavery Society in the case of Mary Prince (39 n44).

<sup>8</sup>In *Invented Lives*, Mary Helen Washington writes, "Narratives by women play an important part in allowing us to hear the voice of slave women; they show women as active agents rather than objects of pity, capable of interpreting their experiences and, like men, able to turn their victimization into triumph" (8). In *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Hazel Carby makes a similar observation about women's slave narrators: "Narratives by black women foreground their active tales as historical agents as opposed to passive subjects, acting upon their own visions they make decisions over their own lives. They also document their sufferings and brutal treatment but in a context that is also the story of resistance" (22).

<sup>9</sup>The image of the individual growing in "national-historical time" is Bakhtin's way of conceptualizing the development of the novel of emergence in "The *Bildungsroman*" (25).

<sup>10</sup>In *Discerning the Subject*, Paul Smith writes, "A person is not simply the actor who follows ideological scripts, but is also an agent who reads them in order to insert him/herself into them—or not" (xxxiv-xxcv). George Lamming makes such a positioning central to his conception of the Caribbean writer and the heroine of *Season of Adventure* (Paquet 3-4 and 72).

<sup>11</sup>Sylvia Wynter argues that "... the African in the New World became a Negro. And the Negro is the world's first uprooted race. He is the only race who is not tied to a land mass. The African belongs to Africa. The European to Europe. The 'Negro' has no such territorial cradle" (34). Mary Prince's narrative contradicts this; she is very specific about her heartland.

<sup>12</sup>Mary Prince's use of the trope prefigures its use in such primary texts of modern Caribbean writing as Aimé Césaire's *Return to My Native Land*, George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*, Edward Kamau Brathwaite's *The Arrivants*, and V. S. Naipaul *Finding the Center*, to name but a few.

<sup>13</sup>On the subject of a national literature, Edouard Glissant writes, "One may speak of a national literature, in the modern sense of the term, only in the instance where a community, faced with a threat to its collective survival, endeavors through the creative use of the spoken and the written word to express the very reason for its existence" (3).

<sup>14</sup>I am indebted to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak for helping me to see the importance of the historically aware resistant woman as an agent of national and global transformation. Her phrase, spoken at the Sites of Colonialism Conference sponsored by Houston A. Baker, Jr., at the American College on March 17, 1990, haunted me during the writing of this essay.

<sup>15</sup>Merle Hodge makes this point about third world women in an interview with Kathleen Balutansky: "The other thing is that the women's movement in the Third World is not only about empowering women, it is very much a liberation process for the whole society" (661).

<sup>16</sup>Other slave narratives, like *The Narrative of Ashton Warner* and *Narrative of the Cruel Treatment of James Williams* make the same point about the *de facto* equality of men and women in slavery. James Williams gives a gruesome account of pregnant women and nursing mothers alongside him at the treadmill. Ashton Warner tells how his pregnant wife is driven to the fields and whipped for being unable to keep up with the others.

<sup>17</sup>Frances Smith Foster finds that, in general, slave women's narratives "devote more discussion to familial relationships" than do men's. She also finds that they "rely less upon litanies of beatings and mutilations of other slaves" ("In Respect" 67). The latter is not true of Mary Prince's narrative.

<sup>18</sup>I have in mind Claude McKay's *My Green Hills of Jamaica*, George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*, C. L. R. James's *Beyond a Boundary*, Derek Walcott's *Another Life*, and Jean Rhys's *Smile, Please*.

<sup>19</sup>The observations of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., about the paradox of representing "the oral within the written, precisely when oral black culture was transforming itself into a written culture" in *The Signifying Monkey* (131-32), apply to *The History of Mary Prince* as well.

<sup>20</sup>The issues surrounding Mary Prince's "speakerly text" add a new dimension to Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s exemplary analysis of the trope of the Talking Book in *The Signifying Monkey*, especially chapters 4 and 5.

<sup>21</sup>In a footnote to Mary Prince's narrative, Thomas Pringle points out the contempt implicit in giving slaves such extravagant names. He does not comment on the contempt for British royalty that is also implicit in such a practice.

<sup>22</sup>One could be legally free in England and still be a slave in the West Indies. Writing about the celebrated case of Grace Jones which was brought before the High Court of Admiralty in 1827, Folarin Shyllon explains, "Temporary residence in England without manumission suspended, but did not extinguish, her status as a slave to which she reverted when she was enticed back to Antigua" (27).

<sup>23</sup>Robert B. Stepto distinguishes three phases of slave narrative narration. In the third phase he differentiates the "generic narrative" from the "authenticating narrative": "In the former, authenticating documents and strategies are totally subsumed by the tale; the slave narrative becomes an identifiable generic text, e.g., autobiography, etc." (181-82).

<sup>24</sup>In her Introduction, Moira Ferguson explains that "the parish records for Brackish Pond for births and marriages do not begin until 1822 so very little is known outside the text" (28).

<sup>25</sup>These precise spatial and familial coordinates distinguish Prince's from many North American narratives. See William Andrews for an explanation of the significance of these coordinates (27-28).

<sup>26</sup>Benedict R. Anderson examines the relationship between print-capitalism and nationalism in the third world in *Imagined Communities*, especially 40-48.

<sup>27</sup>The discursive situation is complex. The use of an amanuensis suggests "the unequal relation between colonizer and colonized, oppressor and oppressed" (Said 48), yet Mary Prince gives the relationship something of the value of a "conversation between equals" (48).

<sup>28</sup>Houston A. Baker, Jr., stresses the importance of negotiating the economics of slavery as a precondition to freedom in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*.

<sup>29</sup>Henry Louis Gates's chapter on "The Signifying Monkey and the Language of Signifyin(g)" in *The Signifying Monkey* explores the full range of signification as a characteristic feature of black speech and black texts in the United States. What he has to say applies equally well to oral and written figures of signification in the West Indies.

<sup>30</sup>What Walcott says about the birth of a poetic tradition in "The Muse of History" applies here: "Epic was compressed in the folk legend. The act of imagination was the creative effort of the tribe. Later such legends may be written by individual poets, but their beginnings are oral, familial, the poetry of firelight which illuminates the faces of a tight, primal hierarchy. But even oral literature forces itself toward hieroglyph and alphabet" (13).

<sup>31</sup>Roger D. Abrahams comes to some important conclusions about the importance black West Indians attached to all forms of speech in *The Man-of-Words in the West Indies*. These include "the use of talk to proclaim presence of self, to assert oneself vocally in the most anxious and unguarded situations. We are shown the importance of arguing in daily life, as one technique of self-dramatization[, along with] the importance of a highly formal and decorous approach to language in both the inter-cultural exchanges and intra-group activities" (29).

<sup>32</sup>Henry Louis Gates writes that the slave, by definition, "possessed at most a liminal status within the human community. To read and to write was to transgress this nebulous realm of liminality" (128). The privileging of orality in Mary Prince's very sophisticated narrative sets her text at odds with the most influential narratives of the period.

<sup>33</sup>Gaston Bachelard's observations about a child's reverie and the consciousness of freedom apply here: "To grasp this liberty when it intervenes in a child's reverie is paradoxical only if one forgets that we still dream of liberty as we dreamed of it when we were children" (101).

<sup>34</sup>The narrative does not permit easy generalizations about sexually frustrated and humiliated slave mistresses. Mrs. Williams's kindness is associated with her husband's philandering; the reverse is true of Mrs. I— and Mrs. Wood. See Minrose C. Gwin's "Green-Eyed Monsters" for a discussion of the psycho-sexual violence inflicted on slave women by their mistresses.

<sup>35</sup>In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry describes the throbbing, feeling heart as a metaphor of interiority: "To . . . conceive of the body in terms of capacities and needs (not now 'lens' but 'seeing,' not now 'pump' but 'having a beating heart' or, more specifically, 'desiring' or 'fearing') is to move further in toward the interior of felt-experience. To, finally, conceive of the body as 'aliveness' or 'awareness of aliveness' is to reside at last within the felt-experience of sentience . . ." (285).

<sup>36</sup>In *History of the Voice*, Edward Kamau Brathwaite states the case for "immanence" as the essential feature Caribbean language and culture: Because Afro-Caribbeans "come from a historical experience where they had to rely on their very *breath* rather than paraphernalia like books and museums and machines[, t]hey had to depend on *immanence*, the power within themselves, rather than the technology outside themselves" (19).



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