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Along and Against the Grain: Close reading *The History of Mary Prince*

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Along and Against the Grain: Close reading *The History of Mary Prince*

Abstract

Due to the highly mediated conditions of its production, *The History of Mary Prince* presents a challenge to New Critical methods of reading that are frequently taught in undergraduate literature classrooms. Without questioning the British abolitionists' textual representation of Prince's experiences, readers unfamiliar with the historical conditions for slave narratives may attribute the publication's sentimentalism and representations of violence as direct expressions of Prince. This essay mobilizes close reading towards contrary ends: I throw the editor's (Thomas Pringle's) paratextual material, particularly the Preface, under scrutiny by close reading its insistence on transparency and symmetry between the first-person narrative and Prince as the narrative's univocal source. Using the Preface as an apparatus for close reading *The History*, I emphasize the dissonance between, on the one hand, the British abolitionists' textual representation of freedom and, on the other, Prince's speech as a practice of freedom. Drawing on the methods developed by Marisa Fuentes and Ann Laura Stoler, I offer historical and geographical contexts that can be layered onto close readings exercises for *The History* – particularly around repeated tropes of salt and allusions to sugar – that destabilize Thomas Pringle's, and by extension the London Antislavery Society's, representation of Prince's public image. I argue how the paratextual materials of *The History* can help instructors foreground the contradictions and asymmetries of power embedded in subaltern representations.

Keywords

Mary Prince, slave narrative, law, Caribbean

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Cover Page Footnote

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If you listen closely, you can hear the whole world in a bent note, a throwaway lyric, a singular thread of the collective utterance.

Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*¹

Scholars of *The History of Mary Prince* are familiar with the highly mediated conditions that produced the first-person narrative. Mary Prince dictated her experiences of enslavement to an amanuensis, Susanna Strickland; this dictation was then edited by Thomas Pringle, the Antislavery Society Secretary who also employed Prince in his household. These highly mediated conditions under asymmetries of power form a stumbling block to readers, myself included, who have been trained in New Critical methods – that is, methods of “sticking close” to words, patterns, and structures that emerge from the text alone. The first-person narrative in *The History* is a multi-person production. Readers of *The History*, then, cannot simply “stick close” to Pringle’s insistence that the narrative is a direct expression of Prince’s experiences. Furthermore, as I’ve increasingly emphasized across my seminar and lecture courses where I assign *The History*, the text prompts its readers to attend to its discontinuities and gaps produced by Strickland’s and Pringle’s “translation” of Prince’s dictation into textual form.² Without questioning the narrative representation of Prince’s experiences, scholars who work with and teach *The History* risk reproducing the distortions and silences embedded in a text where violence and subjugation are omnipresent. The constructed speaker of *The History* cannot be conflated with Prince as a historical actor.

The dissonances between the publication’s constructed speaker and Prince as a speaking subject are particularly apparent when we consider Pringle’s editorial materials alongside the first-person narrative. The first-person narrative is more often taught, despite the fact that the paratextual materials occupy almost equivalent space as the narrative. The paratextual materials lay bare the racial-colonial terms under which an enslaved woman’s speech and embodied experiences were scrutinized by slavery’s advocates and metropolitan abolitionists alike. Rather than avoid the contradictions posed by the editorial materials, instructors can utilize the asymmetries *within* the publication for contrary ends: to scrutinize the uneven power dynamics that legislate when and how subaltern and enslaved experiences are represented, institutionally and otherwise.

This essay discusses how instructors might teach *The History* as a product of multiple perspectives constructed along asymmetries of power. As scholars of

Caribbean literature have pointed out, the first-person narrative is comprised of “composite words” (Collins 10); *The History* is “polyvocal” (Aljoe 18) and follows a “polyphonic arrangement” (Paquet 133). The polyvocality of the first-person narrative is submerged by the overrepresentation of the British abolitionists’ editorial framing.³ As Sara Salih has posed the question, why “was this brief text (it is only twenty-three printed pages in the original) published with a sixteen-page editorial supplement, a validating appendix, and the history of another West African slave?” (xiii). By placing the editorial materials under scrutiny, close reading them in concert with the first-person narrative, instructors can foreground the dissonance between the British abolitionists’ *textual* representations of freedom and Prince’s *speech* as a practice of freedom. The bias embedded in the archival documentation of enslaved peoples’ actions and speech requires that modern-day readers of *The History* (new and returning) attune ourselves to, as Marisa Fuentes puts it, “working with what is there as with what is not” (147). Instructors can merge close-reading practices of “sticking close to the text” with an archival reading practice developed by Fuentes. “Reading along the bias grain,” she writes, “retain[s] the historical integrity of the documents” and is analogous to “cutting fabric on the bias to create more elasticity” (78). Bringing this method into the undergraduate classroom means that instructors and students alike do not “follow a frictionless course,” as Ann Stoler has described the practice of reading along the grain (53). Stoler writes attending to “the granular rather than seamless texture” of colonial documents means that their readers participate in “a field of force and will to power” (53). The narrative’s pluri-vocal qualities are effects of competing representations of subaltern experience, between those who monopolize institutional power and those marginalized from it. Close reading the first-person narrative of *The History* along the grain of the paratextual material amplifies the publication’s asymmetries and, at the same time, requires us to meta-critically reflect on developing political literacies beyond Pringle’s framing.

I suggest here that instructors use the Preface as a meta-critical apparatus for destabilizing Pringle’s insistence of narrative repetitions as the univocal effects of Prince’s dictation. The Preface can be read in concert with the narrative – for instance, its unifying motifs of salt and sugar – to highlight the abolitionists’ literary construction of Prince’s voice. By loosening the documentary framing of *The History*, new and returning readers are more mindful of the opacities of the narrative, which prompt us to take on the creative, unfinished labor of reckoning with what evades the British abolitionists’ textual representation of freedom.

Reading along the grain: Repetitions in *The History* as literary styling

Focusing on figurations of salt and references to sugar in *The History*, in conjunction with Pringle's Preface, can guide readers through the publication's difficult scenes of violence and subjugation without redescribing those scenes. Indeed, in undergraduate literature classrooms where techniques of close reading are taught, instructors who assign *The History* risk subjecting Prince and other enslaved people in the narrative to, as Saidiya Hartman cautions us, "a second order of violence" (5). The scenes of violence in *The History* are frequent, and they can be connected to the publication's literary styling of authenticity: Pringle insists in the Preface that the narrative repetitions are direct effects of Prince's dictation. The publication's scenes of violence reflect the Antislavery Society's broader efforts to consolidate a particular public image of Prince. Before connecting the asymmetries within *The History* to historical conditions for the transcription of Prince's speech, I destabilize Pringle's framing of the printed word as transparently belonging to Prince alone. Then, I draw a connection between the internal contradictions of the Preface to the structural lopsidedness between the paratextual materials and the first-person narrative. I foreground the structural lopsidedness, which facilitates meta-critical discussions around the ethical stakes of engaging with subaltern representations.

The publication's framing materials point squarely at Pringle's efforts to consolidate a univocal representation of slavery's horrors. In his supplementary materials, he stresses that readers can recognize the self-evident authenticity by solely adhering to the first-person narrative: "the internal evidence of the truth of [Prince's] narrative appears remarkably strong. The circumstances are related in a tone of natural sincerity" (58). The documentary function of the narrative is predicated on Prince's "tone of natural sincerity," or the narrative's "voice-effect," to use Kerry Sinanan's phrasing (74). Close reading the paratextual materials, particularly Pringle's Preface, can be used towards alternative purposes: to interrogate Pringle's claim that the first-person narrative's repetitions are authentic signatures of Prince's speech patterns.

In one exercise, students can question the Preface's insistence of Prince as the sole source of the narrative and how it downplays the narrative as a multi-person production. Within one paragraph, Pringle admits that "repetitions and prolixities" were documented "fully" and, at the same time, the narrative was only edited "to exclude redundancies" necessary to "render it intelligible" (3). Pringle's remarks form an apparatus for us to read with and against. He admits omitting repetitions in Prince's "peculiar phraseology" (3) in the Preface. Jessica L. Allen has similarly pointed out how repetitions and the Preface "reveal a tension regarding

narrative control” (515). The repetitions within *The History*, contradictorily, are effects of the narrative’s supposed authenticity *and* editorial construction. This contradiction can not only be used to unsettle Pringle’s claim that the printed words faithfully represent Prince’s expressions; the contradiction can be mobilized for understanding why sentimental rhetoric appears and how it amplifies the repeated scenes of violence in the publication.

Allen has suggested that repetitions in the first-person narrative (such as “weep, weep, weep” [16], “clatter, clatter, clatter” [17], “work – work – work” [21]) are “Creole linguistic and narrative patterns” (517) that have “survived Pringle’s editing” (516). It is important to emphasize Prince’s role in conveying aspects of her life to the Antislavery Society. However, deliberating which words and phrases belong to whom rehearses impossible debates around authentic representation (such debates also tempt fictions of purity). Further, the pursuit of drawing direct lines between words and the various people involved in *The History* can inadvertently replicate the power dynamic of “authorities” who exert their protocols for “authenticating” the first-person narrative. As Allen rightly asserts, the narrative’s “polyphony does not mean that those voices exist harmoniously and free from white privilege and racist assumptions” (515). Pringle’s contradictory statement around repetitions attempts to disappear the role of institutions, social power, and perceptions of authority that create hierarchies of humanity. Repetitions in the first-person narrative, then, do not signify authenticity or transparency. They contain – in multiple senses of the word – the dissonant worldviews and opacities produced by asymmetrical institutions of power.

The printed words of *The History* mirror the publication’s structural imbalance between the first-person narrative and the editor’s materials, manifesting at the level of the word. To foreground the publication’s asymmetries and the power dynamics therein, instructors can pair a close reading of the Preface with discussions around the etymology of the verb “frame.” To frame is to “shape, form, direct (a person, a person’s life, thoughts, actions, etc.); discipline, train (a person, animal, one’s tongue)” (OED). Reflections on the verb can be connected back to the Preface, where Pringle names his efforts to modify “gross grammatical errors” (3) and “render [Prince’s dictation] clearly intelligible” (3). A classroom exercise that pairs the etymology of “frame” with close readings of the Preface can lay the foundation for meta-critical conversations about the relationship between power and interpretation that structure the text. Additionally, this exercise could encourage discussions around the quotidian practices of subjugation and racialization that manifest in the parlance of authenticity and intelligibility. If repetitions in the first-person narrative are signs of authenticity,

then Pringle's prefatory remarks function to mobilize narrative repetitions to stabilize a racial other. To decouple repetitions' association with transparency, instructors can point out that both Strickland and Pringle had literary careers beyond the Antislavery Society.⁴ Repetitions in the narrative, then, can be read as traces of literary stylings of authenticity organized around asymmetries of power. Upon unsettling the transparency of the printed word, instructors can provide context for the historical conditions surrounding Prince's speech and the conflicting characterizations of Prince in the paratextual materials.

Breaking Pringle's framing – its proposed symmetry between word and source – can guide students and instructors to meta-critically grapple with the constraints and restraints involved in close reading the first-person narrative. The close reading exercises around Pringle's Preface prompt additional questions around why Prince's personal experiences were subjected to “protocols” of legibility and verifiability.

(Dis)locations of speech: Geographic contexts for Prince as speaking subject

To further destabilize Pringle's documentary framing, I momentarily move outside the publication to emphasize a distinction between, on the one hand, the stylized speaker of *The History* and, on the other, Prince as speaking subject. As evidenced in the publication's structural imbalance, there is an overrepresentation of the Antislavery Society's framing that dislocates Prince's dictation from a wider geography of heterogeneous struggles (organized and individual) to materialize freedom across the Americas. Prince's presence as a speaking subject is more palpable when we reverse the direction of scrutiny and interrogate the British abolitionists' as-told-to framing. As Belinda Edmondson has argued: “Black women are the most common vector around which racial ventriloquism, dialect narrative, and political discourse merge during this period...Black women were particularly potent symbols for *both abolitionists and slavery advocates*” (45, my emphasis). This broader political landscape levels the Antislavery Society's representation of Prince in relation to the competing ideologies of the time; this context also sharpens how Prince as a speaking subject disrupted the governing political representations of Black women.

Pringle's contradictory statement around repetitions attempts to obscure the multi-person production of *The History* and, by extension, disappear the role of institutions in maintaining accounts of enslaved people. Instructors can pivot from the close reading exercises around the Preface to provide a broader political geography for Prince's movements, activities, and speech. This broader geography for *The History* prepares students for close readings of scenes and

figurations of salt that demonstrate how the text moves in at least two directions. Despite the British abolitionists' overrepresentation of themselves in the styling of her dictation, Prince's affective naming of places (such as specific islands in the Caribbean) and people (including the anonymous people who came to her aid, like an "old slave woman" who "did what she could" when Prince "became quite cripple" from erysipelas [25]) reconfigures the narrative as memory of and return to the Caribbean.

I unsettle Pringle's framing by providing a sketch of the political geography that *The History* prompts. In effect, I aim to illustrate how despite restrictions policing enslaved women's speech and agency, Prince materializes a counter-memory to the British abolitionist plotting of her experiences. When teaching *The History*, I've found it useful to emphasize how power, authority, and location form a central nexus for understanding the archives of slavery and its representations. The various legal systems of the Atlantic world exemplify this nexus, and they bring into sharp focus the contested and contradictory representations of enslaved, free, and emancipated women and men of the African diaspora. The legal systems of the Atlantic world were shaped by dominant discourses around slavery that ultimately protected the interests of the ruling classes and their ways of life. By aligning the legal contexts of the colonies with the imperial-metropolitan context, instructors can connect the asymmetries of *The History* to a broader political landscape of overlapping "legal" systems that sought to control every aspect of enslaved people's lives, their activities and physical movements.

In particular, instructors can momentarily move outside the text to contextualize Prince's turn to the Antislavery Society in relation to nineteenth-century amelioration laws in the Caribbean and the 1772 *Somerset v. Stewart* ruling, through which England declared slavery was incompatible with its common law. The English legal system provided Prince a limited form of recourse to negotiate her freedom from her enslavers, the Woods, who brought her from Antigua to London in 1828.⁵ This moment, between the British Abolition Act of 1807 (abolition of trafficking of Africans) and the British Abolition Act of 1833 (formal abolition of slavery), is also important to highlight for students. Laws in the Caribbean were created to maintain existing enslaved populations by curtailing deaths and restraining widespread abuse on plantations. "The passage of various amelioration acts," as Nicole Aljoe has argued, "lay the foundation – albeit problematically—for a type of legal-political slave subjectivity" (364). Similarly, Joan Anim-Addo has highlighted the contradictory conditions for enslaved women's political speech: "at this historic moment, through the pen of the planters themselves in a dual, conflicting role of judge/jury, aggressor/mediator, slave master/repository justice, the direct cries of African-

Caribbean women are heard for the first time” (37). The competing accounts of Prince that appear across the first-person narrative and the paratextual materials can be read in relation to this legal, imperial infrastructure. For instance, Pringle’s supplement includes a letter from Prince’s former enslaver, John Wood, as well as counter-arguments and accounts of Prince that are pitched against Wood’s depiction of her “moral character” (43). Competing accounts by people who knew the Woods and Prince, including Pringle’s own account, are then positioned within Pringle’s broader critique of what is “characteristic” in slavery in the West Indies. Pringle writes, “the case affords a most instructive illustration of the true spirit of the slave system and the pretensions of the slaveholders to assert” (57). The respective essays of Aljoe and Anim-Addo can provide a foundation for instructors and students to begin discussions around the particular legal contexts in the Caribbean referenced in Pringle’s supplement and throughout his editorial notes.

A broader terrain of legal institutions exemplifies the exclusionary and disciplinary terms of recognition that enslaved men and women confronted. As Elsa Goveia writes in her study *The West Indian Slave Laws of the 18th Century*, “in so far as the slave was allowed a personality before the law, he was regarded chiefly, almost solely, as a political criminal” (25). This political terrain pushes readers of *The History* to imagine the fugitive networks of exchange that intersect – and, indeed, exceed – formal structures that were monopolized by people who protected their profit interests and ways of life. Instructors can build on the close-reading exercise of the Preface by connecting Pringle’s efforts to “translate” Prince’s experiences according to a “progress” narrative of freedom that concludes with England, evidenced in the final paragraph of the first-person narrative. To further unsettle how Pringle plots Prince’s actions to prefigure England as a symbol of freedom, instructors can point out how the perspective of slavery’s advocates is embedded in the paratextual materials; that perspective attunes readers to less formalized, domestic, and extralegal spaces through which Prince sought to materialize freedom for herself, like the Caribbean’s internal markets: “I took in washing, and sold coffee and yams and other provisions to the captains of ships” (27).

Rather than avoid the complexities posed by the competing (mis)characterizations of Prince, instructors might emphasize them as records of Prince’s presence disfigured by what Walter Johnson has phrased as “a rhetorical field dominated by white supremacy” (10). As Jenny Sharpe has demonstrated, Prince’s subjectivity materializes across the publication’s documents, from various locations of speech: “Prince’s subjectivity cuts across seemingly incompatible documents in which she appears, not as a first-person narrator, but as ‘the woman

Molly' and 'she (witness)'" (147). While keeping in view the rhetorical field shared by slavery advocates and abolitionists is important for understanding the limitations posed by *The History*, this rhetorical field can also overwhelm and eclipse Prince's presence as a historical actor. Prince's actions – from extramarital relations to negotiations of purchasing herself – are part of, but not reducible to, a complicated web of responses to her exposure to gendered forms of terror and violence. This complex web requires discussions around dissemblance, strategic silences, and other activities of survival that evade Pringle's attempts to make Prince's speech "intelligible" for his readers.

Instructors might assign Gale Jackson's 1993 poem, "mary prince bermuda. turks island. antigua. 1787" along with the work of Jennifer Morgan's 2018 "Partus sequitur ventrem: Law, Race, and Reproduction in Colonial Slavery." Jackson's poem reworks scenes from *The History* and the narrative's "mask of silence" (6) around strategies of survival and forms of organized resistance that are not contained in *The History*.⁶ Morgan focuses on the colonial legal structures of the English Atlantic world that "defined racial slavery through the irony of a kinlessness born in a woman's womb" (15), and how from that contradictory position enslaved women navigated and altered conditions for themselves and their kin. Together, poetry and history in the classroom help in elaborating the ethical stakes in tracing the lives of enslaved women, whose most intimate relations and flesh were made vulnerable to the caprices of those who monopolized control for exploit and profit. Building on the political geography of *The History* as context, instructors might layer on a longer history of the Americas where forms of social inheritance and dispossession were scripted in law through enslaved women's reproductive capacity. A "perverse geography of a racialized public," as Morgan has described it, is refracted across the writings of slavery's advocates and abolitionists (7). Awareness of this racialized public foregrounds an ethics of reading for new and returning readers of *The History*, one that emphasizes the psychic structures of race, coloniality, desire, and power that are at work when we encounter subaltern representations.

Along and against the grain: Close reading sugar, salt, and saltwater

Dissonance in *The History* speaks to the ways in which Prince's experiences cannot be contained by Pringle's textual representation; it prompts readers to take on the creative activity of imagining political literacies and liberatory horizons in and beyond the text. Without close reading the paratextual materials in relation to the first-person narrative of *The History*, instructors can unintentionally replicate the paternalism, racial hierarchy, and sexual moralism embedded in Pringle's (and by extension the Antislavery Society's) construction of Prince's public image. As

Ryan Hanley has demonstrated, the Antislavery Society “deliberately engineer[ed] a gendered perception of Prince as a passive victim of abuse and exploitation” (78-9). Close reading repetitions, particularly the figurative uses of salt and sugar, exposes the sentimental tropes of the narrative as the effects of British abolitionists “translating” Prince’s dictation into terms legible to their worldview and values. To further collapse Pringle’s documentary framing of *The History* – and to emphasize the composite words of the first-person narrative – I connect Pringle’s naming and obscuring of Strickland (Prince’s amanuensis) to provide context for the literary motifs of salt and allusions to sugar. Repetitions in the first-person narrative are both literary stylings and signifiers of opacity. In one direction, they function to consolidate the sentimental objectification of Prince’s experiences. In the other, they amplify the fragmentary and marginalized elements in the text stemming from Prince’s affective naming of specific places and people in the Caribbean.

The colonial scenes of violence in *The History* were collated and organized for middle-class white women who participated in the public antislavery movement largely through their position as consumers. As Charlotte Sussman has argued: “By representing themselves as primarily mediums for the dissemination of proper reading material, and as exemplary readers of it, members of [ladies’ antislavery societies] avoided the stigma of professional writing, obscuring their own agency in shaping the ways that colonial scenes were viewed” (156). This representation of white women as medium is mirrored in the Preface: Strickland, though not named, is figured as “a lady” who had “taken down from Mary’s own lips” the narrative (3). Pringle’s emphasis on authenticity distances Strickland’s role in shaping Prince’s dictation; it secures a fiction of racial innocence while disappearing how psychic structures of race (e.g., white saviorism) and power (e.g., desire to maintain status through subjugation, virtually and materially) operate together.

Gendered consumerist logics are also embedded in the racial hierarchy produced in Pringle’s framing (Sussman 156). *The History* was part of a broader network of antislavery activities that included women’s circulation of political texts in the bourgeois domestic sphere and their boycotting of sugar. The sugar boycotts give the repeated phrase “to be very sweet” in *The History* a special resonance. The brutal production of sugar in the colonies turned an early modern luxury into a stimulant integrated into the impoverished diets of Europe’s working classes; out of this transformation was “the complex idea that one could become different by consuming differently” (Mintz 185). As a commonly known substance associated with the transatlantic slave trade, sugar forms an effective, concrete counterpoint in *The History*. The association of sweetness with freedom not only appears in the

narrative; it is also echoed in the Supplement, where Pringle explicitly cites Prince: in England, he writes, an enslaved person “has tasted ‘the sweets of freedom,’ to quote the words of the unfortunate Mary Prince” (62). Since references to sweetness in the publication bring to mind the antislavery sugar boycotts, then instructors might invite students to consider the allusion to sugar, by way of sweetness, in contrast to the publication’s overrepresentation of salt, which appears *both* figuratively and literally. The absence of literal sugar in *The History* may be an effect of the economic conditions of Antigua, where Prince lived prior to being brought to England by her captors. The island, as historian Natasha Lightfoot has observed, “had fallen to seventh place on the list of large-scale sugar production in the British Caribbean” (31). Because antislavery pamphlets were circulated alongside calls for boycotting sugar, the literal and figurative uses of salt may be a substitute for calling to mind sugar and other commodities produced by the trade. That is, “the whiteness of the salt,” as Matthew Rowney argues, “bears a metonymic relation” (359).⁷ This metonymic relation aligns commodifying forces of the trade with scenes of violence. *The History*’s descriptions of Prince toiling for salt in the ponds of Turks Island and her witnessing of Daniel – an older, enslaved person with a disability who also worked in the ponds – are among the most detailed scenes of violence in the narrative.

Close reading Pringle’s Preface prepares students for discussing how redundancies and repetitions operate in *The History*. In light of the literary motifs of salt, Prince’s witnessing of Daniel is narratively positioned to reflect the text itself as a consumable object: “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” (21). Though alleged to be effects of authenticity, the repetitions of salt operate in tandem with the narrative’s scenes of violence. The repetitions partially function as crystallizing ideas of racial difference and hierarchy. Pringle’s univocal narrative representation of Prince ultimately gestures back to the unmarked observer (the white gaze) of suffering.

Saltwater tears in the narrative merge the textual representations of Prince, conflating her flesh with the commodity she must harvest on Turk’s Island. The figurative use of saltwater tears and the repeated appearance of saltwater can be read by students as constructed effects of the editorial hand, one that simultaneously insists on the authenticity of the account while effacing the text as a multi-person production. Earlier in the narrative, Prince says “Oh, the trials! The trials! They make the saltwater come to my eyes when I think of the days in which I was afflicted – the times that are gone; when I mourned and grieved with a young heart for those whom I loved” (13). Saltwater functions as a sentimental

metaphor, blurring graphic scenes of violence with the imagery of tears. But saltwater later turns literal in the extended description of the salt ponds, heightening the narrative's function as an exposé. The literalism of the salt ponds is presented as plainly as possible, such that the readers do not question the facticity of the representation.

Alongside Pringle's documentary framing, it may seem that Prince's literal naming of people – enslavers, free Black people, missionaries, and the enslaved -- function to authenticate Prince's testimony to the Antislavery Society. But Prince's naming also indexes an act of collective mourning: "In telling my own sorrows, I cannot pass by those of my fellow-slaves – for when I think of my own griefs, I remember theirs" (22). Her naming of people throughout the text also ushers forth fragments of enslaved people's lives – Daniel's, Cyrus', Jack's, Sarah's, Rebecca's, Hetty's. Their lives surface as part of the counter-memory in *The History*. Prince's naming emphasizes the interpretive tension between the British abolitionist sentimental objectification of Prince and her memory which warps that objectification. Lynn Festa has demonstrated how "the moment of recognition" in sentimental texts "is not the pronouncing of another's name... but tears, the performed sign of sensibility in response to a shared object of pity" (56). Amid the recounting of her personal experiences is also Prince's remembrance of enslaved lives. Their names work with and against British abolitionist sentimentalism.

The social and historical context of the word *saltwater* in the Americas pushes readers of *The History* to grapple with the disorienting, dislocating temporal experience of remembering Atlantic passages of captives and the difficult silences embedded in the archives of enslavement. While the sentimental troping of saltwater tears evokes the horrors and violence behind the commodities of the slave trade, including the flesh of the enslaved themselves, the trope also overlaps with the trope of return in Prince's testimony. As Sandra Paquet argues, the narrative "reveals a profound identification with the West Indies as a territorial cradle" (132). Saltwater, then, has a different resonance when students revisit the opening of *The History*. Prince indicates that she "was born at Brackish-Pond, Bermuda" (3). As Paquet writes, "The trope of return to one's native land is fully formed here as a return to the West Indies – past, present, and future" (132). Read in another direction, within its regional context, saltwater in the narrative disrupts the British abolitionists' moral geography that plots freedom as a linear movement towards England. Historian Stephanie Smallwood writes that saltwater is a "fragment of the slaves' language [which] put a name to the crooked lines (social, cultural, epistemological) that shaped their Atlantic world (7-8). Referring to the centuries-old movement of slave ships bringing new captive Africans to the

Americas, saltwater had a “pejorative connotation”; at the same time the word “hinted at what was problematic about the perennial appearance of newcomers” in the communities created by American-born descendants of survivors of the Middle Passage (7). Saltwater, Smallwood observes, sounds “the traumatic echo of commodification” and reflects the challenges faced by survivors and their descendants in establishing a sense of stability in the Americas (7). Like Prince’s literal naming of people and places in the narrative – fleeting glimpses of lives that intersect with hers – the word *saltwater* operates as a fragment of Prince’s particular ways of knowing that mark the limits of what the text can reveal.

The opacity of subaltern and enslaved struggles disrupts Pringle’s authenticating gestures in the Preface and supplementary material. Rather than repeating the descriptive violence of the salt ponds in the classroom, instructors might focus on Prince’s exclamation, “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” (21). Here is an instance in *The History* that seems to underscore the narrative framing’s documentary objectives. But this passage doubles as a limit; the passage *cannot* represent the psychic realities of flesh commodified and made disposable in the wake and afterlives of transatlantic slavery. The non-linearity of remembrance and grief – its opacities and discontinuous shapes – reminds us that Prince’s recollection of her experiences operates outside the coordinates of British abolitionism. Diasporic return and mourning play important roles in shifting the perspective of slavery from a liberal-humanist progress narrative toward understanding “slavery as a condition to viewing enslavement as a predicament, in which enslaved Africans and their descendants never ceased to pursue a politics of belonging, mourning, accounting and regeneration” (Brown 1248). Pairing *The History* with Vincent Brown’s 2009 essay “Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery,” or with Paul Gilroy’s conceptualization of a “politics of transfiguration” (38), would deepen conversations around how Prince’s dictation to the Antislavery Society materialized a sense of freedom distinct from the society’s political motivations.

As a polyvocal and polyphonic text, *The History* asks that we develop political literacies that help us attend to the dissonance, noise, and silences that evade textual representation. While Pringle’s Preface and editorial materials aim to construct a unified representation of slavery, elements in the text, like records of screams and Hetty’s shrieks signify the psychic and somatic experiences that are unrepresentable (Prince 14). Silences that emerge from the creative activity of imagining beyond Pringle’s framing are revealing too: Sharpe has observed that

The History “gives no indication of the higher incidence of slaves running away from the salt-producing Turks and Caicos Islands” (132). How might this observation, alongside other organized acts of resistance in 1831, such as Nat Turner’s uprising in Virginia, point squarely at the fugitive forms of emancipatory activities that might intersect, but cannot be contained, in *The History*? Instructors can contrast Pringle’s and the Antislavery’s Society’s public representation of Prince by citing an 1831 uprising in Antigua, where Prince lived prior to traveling with her captors to England. Colonial administrators in Antigua sought to shut down the market space that enslaved people had cultivated for themselves and where the colonial militia was met with armed resistance. Studying this uprising of the enslaved, Lightfoot points out that not only were women an “unmistakable presence” in the rebellion, but also the uprising “was not an unprecedented outburst; rather, it represented an expression of enslaved people’s growing resentment against repeated encroachments on an institution central to their community” (53). By turning to the conjuncture of 1831, between the publication of *The History* and the uprising in Antigua, instructors can point to the dynamic conditions of history and lay the groundwork for discussions around how freedom was materialized in heterogenous ways across the Americas.

To conclude, I want to emphasize how the complexities of *The History* – its gaps, elisions, and indexes of Prince’s circuitous routes to materialize freedom – emerge when readers pause on (rather than “make legible”) the opacity of subaltern struggles. The structural asymmetries of *The History* prompt readers to reckon with how the publication’s fragmentary qualities and silences are indicative of global asymmetries produced by empire and colonization. These global asymmetries are succinctly captured in Stuart Hall’s oft-cited illustration of how the displacement and dispossession of people at the so-called colonial peripheries are, in fact, central to the story of power:

I am the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea. I am the sweet tooth, the sugar plantations that rotted generations of English children’s teeth. There are thousands of others beside me that...are the cup of tea itself. Because they don't grow it in Lancashire...This is the symbolization of English identity – I mean, what does anybody in the world know about an English person except that they can't get through the day without a cup of tea? Where does it come from? Ceylon - Sri Lanka, India (48-49).

The place of the reader is integral for cultivating self-reflexivity and meta-critical analysis that can unsettle our taken-for-granted interpretative frameworks.⁸ When teaching *The History*, emphasizing the place(s) from which we read along with

the juxtaposition of different voices from the Caribbean can initiate alternative pathways for grappling with the discontinuities in our individual and collective understandings of the world. More immediately, the places from which people speak (and to whom they speak) form a multivalent approach to reading and discussing *The History* in an undergraduate literature classroom. Joan Anim-Addo has theorized how the juxtaposition of voices from the Caribbean functions as an “alternative pedagogical tool” (321). She describes this as a “carnivalised discourse [that] seeks the juxtaposition of disparate critical voices and meanings demanded by texts, a plurivocality first demanded by [Caribbean] writers and critics in their rejection of theoretical containment” (264). When I teach *The History*, I often engage with the ethics of care modeled in the historical and creative work of Black feminist scholars, particularly those whose work center on the Caribbean. Their writings are often interwoven throughout my syllabi, generating a semester-long critical intertextuality that encourages readers to reflect on the various places from which readers organize their thoughts. Indeed, this intertextuality informs the style of my essay here. Place shapes cultural contexts and creates boundaries around our thought; we can transgress those boundaries by destabilizing our frames of reference.⁹

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¹ Hartman, p. 345.

² The courses I refer to here were developed for undergraduates at Reed College and the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

³ My attention to framing draws inspiration from Merle Collins’s essay, “Framing the Word: Caribbean Women’s Writings.” Collins emphasizes how the literary history of British women’s writing circumscribed and altered the experiences that Prince dictated to Strickland. Collins writes: “The shape of the word took was influenced by the type of frame fashioned by white women writers from Aphra Behn in the seventeenth century onwards, by the expectations of the Quaker women missionaries, and by white British women’s ideas on femininity” (5).

⁴ Juliet Shields’s *Mary Prince, Slavery, and Print Culture Anglophone Atlantic World* (2021) offers an excellent overview of the literary careers of Strickland and Pringle.

⁵ But, as Elsa Goveia reminds us, “the idea that slaves were property was as firmly accepted in the law of England as it was in that of the colonies” (21).

⁶ See Jenny Sharpe’s reading of Jackson’s poem in *Ghosts of Slavery*, pp. 135-136.

⁷ Matthew Rowney’s work has been instructive and has demonstrated salt’s various historical resonances that raise questions as to its foundational role in the development of Western society

and the larger movement toward the globalization of commerce. See also Cherene Sherrard-Johnson's creative nonfiction essay on travel, the salt industry, Mary Prince, and the Caribbean "Saltworks," and Michele Speitz's essay, "Blood Sugar and Salt Licks: Corroding Bodies and Preserving Nations in *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, Related by Herself*."

⁸ The way we read literature is informed by where we know from. Our textual experiences, in other words, are intimately connected to the places that shape us as readers. That place informs how we interpret the world seems like a basic premise, but it is an important one. See Eugenia Zuroski, "Where Do You Know From?: An Exercise in Placing Ourselves Together in the Classroom."

⁹ For deepening our understanding of developing literacies beyond Euro-American institutions and contexts, see VèVè A. Clark, "Developing Diaspora Literacy and Marasa Consciousness."

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