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Sites of Authentication

Migration and Subjectivity in The History of Mary Prince

CONTEXTUALIZING MARY PRINCE

The History of Mary Prince, As Related by Herself (1831) gives an account of a West Indian slave who, after being forced to move from place to place in and around the Caribbean, tells her story in England to the Anti-Slavery Society. Her story begins in Bermuda, where she is bought by a Captain Darrel for his granddaughter Betsey Williams. Upon her mistress Mrs. Williams’s death, she is sold to the cruel Captain I—. She is separated from her mother and sisters, endures brutal physical labor and punishment, is sexually exploited, and somehow manages to remain economically resourceful and make a small amount of money in her own right by buying and selling goods in the public square. Her narrative, while certainly only one of so many others that arose out of European colonial expansion in the Caribbean, deserves attention for the way it manages to subvert the charges made for and against her authenticity as a woman of a certain kind of character by her editor and former owner, as well as by modern scholars who continue to make similar appeals to her “authentic” and universalizing voice.

Questions of authenticity are nothing new in studies of slave narratives, of course, as often the ones relaying the experiences had to “prove” their own good character and the veracity of their stories. In their vol-
ume *Early Black British Writing*, Alan Richardson and Debbie Lee suggest that “Prince . . . writing after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, attempt[s] . . . to bring colonial slavery home to the metropolitan center” (11). In this sense, her attempt at appearing authentic to British citizens becomes all the more important: “[She] presents her own dilemma—technically free in England, but doomed to re-enslavement if she returns to her home and husband in Antigua—as a study in imperial contradiction and British hypocrisy” (Richardson and Lee 11). Thus, from a “dilemma” of ambiguity, Prince must pass a threshold of authenticity and moral character in order to have at least some version of her story told. Further, Prince presents a certain kind of image to the readers of her narrative that is “utterly sentimentalized and in need of pity and salvation” (234). Her position and presentation as a slave are in a constant state of construction and revision. So, too, then, is her narrative separated from a notion of authenticity that would impose a fixed understanding on her subjectivity.

It is important to foreground Prince’s narrative context of England in the early nineteenth century. Both textually and emphatically, British societal norms and expectations are present. Indeed, Prince’s narrative was published for the first time only two years before England put its 1833 Emancipation Bill into effect. Thus charged politically, Prince’s narrative was both laden with the Anti-Slavery Society’s editorial agenda and subjected to legal scrutiny that questioned the text’s veracity as well as Prince’s own feminine moral character. This series of textual and socio-historical impediments demonstrates the way agency is simultaneously created and decentered in Prince’s text. The formation and disruption of agency is of particular significance, as arguments for and against the authenticity of Prince’s experience shaped the editorial strategies as well as the reception of her text.

Richardson and Lee point out the significance of Prince’s narrative alongside other slave narratives: “Mary Prince (c. 1788–c. 1833) occupies a singular place in the history of Black British writing: not only was she the first black woman to escape slavery and publish her narrative but her work remains the only known English-language narrative written by a West Indian slave woman” (233). That Henry Louis Gates includes Mary Prince’s *History* in a volume entitled *Classic Slave Narratives* (1987) speaks to the increasing critical attention paid to her text. Richardson and Lee go on to provide a useful summary of the critical response to Prince’s *History*:
Scholars regard Prince’s *History* as a unique cultural production. Sandra Pouchet Paquet (1992) holds that despite the constraints placed on Prince and her text, her narrative nevertheless retains a “qualitative uniqueness,” one that is “distinctly West Indian, distinctly a black woman’s and distinctly a slave’s,” while Sukhdev Sandhu and David Dabydeen (1999) remark that against other Black British slave writings, Prince’s narrative stands out for its visceral quality. They rightly contrast the monosyllabic, “witness stand simplicity” of Prince’s account with the long-winded, moralistic tone of polemic that creeps into some other British slave narratives. (233)

Of particular interest to me is the critical emphasis on the “qualitative uniqueness” and the “visceral quality” of Prince’s narrative. This focus is echoed in criticism of *Their Eyes Were Watching God, Mama Day,* and *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem.* A consistent, essentialist examination of these texts maintains that there is such a “qualitative uniqueness,” preserved by what is thought to be an authentic voice projected in each novel. Unveiling this sustained critical lens reveals that a search for a “visceral quality” is the wrong quest; however, these novels share more interesting and productive elements with *The History of Mary Prince* than misguided critical readings. My reading of Prince’s *History* attempts to subvert not only a linear reading of her narrative but also a clear reading of Prince “herself” as a stable subject.

In his preface to the narrative, abolitionist and secretary to the Anti-Slavery Society Thomas Pringle discusses the circumstances under which Prince’s words were recorded and the cares taken to ensure their accuracy. He states, “No fact of importance has been omitted . . . It is essentially her own,” going on to note the “requisite” changes made to make the narrative “intelligible” (185, emphasis mine). After the initial writing process, Pringle and Joseph Phillips “went over the whole, carefully examining her on every fact and circumstance detailed: and in all that relates to her residence in Antigua” (185). Mary Prince herself, then, is only one of several voices that constitute “her” story. My reading of the narrative takes its cue from Jenny Sharpe’s claim in “‘Something Akin to Freedom’: The Case of Mary Prince” that “we must acknowledge the limitations of a model of subjectivity based on notions of self-autonomy and/or free will” (53). Such a reading, according to Sharpe, allows for an account “of the slave rather than the ex-slave” (53). She offers Mr. Wood’s threats to sell Prince as an example of Prince’s complicated would-be autonomy, as
Prince answers Wood with others’ requests to purchase her. Sharpe understands that “A simple and linear plotting of the slave’s quest for emancipation is inadequate for explaining such negotiations, whereby the slave woman’s sale is not the sign of her status as property but of her will” (53). In that vein, I submit that linear understandings of the way in which Prince employs “voice” are likewise inadequate. Prince speaks both with rebellion to masters and with internalized acquiescence to the moralistic conventions of her British audience. Her voice is by no means singular or consistent.

For the purposes of this discussion, I maintain Sharpe’s emphasis on the subject in the context of slavery instead of post-emancipation. However, I want specifically to take up the figure of the slave in motion. Thus, my reading of Mary Prince focuses on how the elements of volition and repression are manifested in her migrations, both geographical and textual. These latter textual migrations of The History come in the form of the English patronage and printing of Prince’s narrative and subsequent legal fallout. First I look at discursive handlings of gender and sexuality, particularly the admissions and omissions of sexual experiences, and then I move into a discussion of the significant relationships engaged with and by other women in Prince’s History.

Directly following Prince’s first-person account of her experiences, Thomas Pringle publishes a “Supplement to The History of Mary Prince” in which he explains the legal feuds surrounding Prince’s freedom. Significantly but not surprisingly, the supplementary material is laden with rhetoric and allegations having to do with character—especially the character of John Wood, Prince’s master upon her arrival in England, and of Mary Prince herself. Place is at the heart of these discussions. Specifically in question is whether Prince should legally be allowed to travel back to Antigua as a free woman, having left Wood and his family in England and living free under British law. Wood fought back and remained steadfast in his refusal to give over his legal hold on Prince. Pringle’s description of the legal fallout and his own argument regarding the case’s relevance to the Anti-Slavery Society’s ideals are important to consider on two levels. First, this material solidifies the powerful rhetorical position that Pringle holds over the narrative. It casts Mary Prince as the object of intellectual analysis, certainly not as intellectual agent in her own story. Inasmuch as discourse creates identity, Prince as a subject is not only economic but also intellectual property. This is not to suggest that Pringle was purely self-motivated. I mean only to foreground his editorial volition that disrupts what is often read as Prince’s identifiable and autono-
mous voice. Second, the supplementary material proves key to a reading of gender and labor as complementary and conflicting forces that receive meaning(s) based on and through geographical situation. In her role as speaker, or as author of her own experiences, Prince remains nonetheless ambiguous—out of her master’s house but working in her patron’s, free in England but still enslaved in Antigua, exotic outsider but respectable British subject.

In his depictions of Mary Prince and her case, Pringle emphasizes qualities that are particularly important to the cultural context. Important for him is a portrayal of Mary Prince as a lady that contrasts with the depiction that John Wood gives of her as a licentious, promiscuous miscreant. Pringle initially writes up Prince’s case with the solicitor George Stephen to determine whether “her freedom could be legally established on her return to Antigua” (216). Pringle describes her reaction to their work in such a way that presents her as a doting wife:

On this occasion, in Mr. Stephen’s presence and mine, she expressed, in very strong terms, her anxiety to return thither if she could go as a free person, and at the same, time, her extreme apprehensions of the fate that would probably await her if she returned as a slave. Her words were, “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;—slavery is too too bad. I would rather go into my grave!” (216)

We see here an expressed conflict between gender and labor concerns. Prince articulates her predicament as one of a wife who wants to see her husband before immediately following that desire with the one to remain free. Her fears of slavery are cast in terms of being “use[d] . . . very hard” and working as a field slave.

Gillian Whitlock suggests the efficacy of reading Mary Prince’s History in relation to “other colonial autobiographic subjects,” as “Prince’s story foregrounds those visceral processes which determined who might speak; how, when, where and why; and how they might engage a ‘believing’ reader” (10). I see this as the case, too, for what Prince’s narrative has to offer to women’s stories more generally in which migration plays an integral part in subject formation. While many readers of her text, such as Whitlock and Sharpe, discuss the stylistic ambiguities and complexities in the narrative, I want to emphasize the role that the geographical
and societal shifts themselves play in the often conflictual presentation of Prince’s voice.

HEARING VOICES: CRITICAL CONTEXT

Much of the literary criticism on Mary Prince’s History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave explores the issue of “voice,” looking at where and how the central figure of each narrative “speaks.” There are particularly striking possibilities and limitations of two manifestations of this vein of criticism. First, scholars point to voice as an authentic and identifiable thing, a representation of empowered and unfettered autonomy. Second, many use the seeming presence of such voice in each text to signal a representative envoy for a broad collective. The critical trend that focuses on voice, presumably, has to do with important questions of subject formation and the ways that marginalized women of color reject abject status in relation to their societies. Thinking of how identity is constructed offers extremely useful readings of the relationships between the authorial or editorial voices and the “I”s in the texts. However, such a focus also relies on the idea of authenticity, a trope upon which these very narratives cast doubt. Rather than insisting on the authentic voice or authority of a woman speaking from coercive contexts in which the writing is not her own, feminist and postcolonialist thinkers should approach such voice in the manner that Gillian Whitlock suggests we read. In The Intimate Empire, Whitlock states that the narrative “alerts us that autobiographic texts in the field of colonial and postcolonial cultures will raise issues of power and privilege, marginality and authority, truth and authenticity in ways which may disqualify them as autobiography as it is conventionally understood” (15). If we are willing to investigate the other voices and dynamics at work in Prince’s text rather than classify The History simply as “autobiographical slave narrative,” we will invite more options with which to explore and understand the importance of her life and work. Such a reading is particularly key for enabling a comparative analysis setting Prince’s work in relation to novels such as I, Tituba, which also present women of African diasporas in coerced patterns of migration that leave them speaking and telling their stories, but ultimately displaced.

In her Writings on Black Women of the Diaspora: History, Language, and Identity, Lean’tin Bracks situates her reading of Mary Prince’s narrative at a nexus of ancestry, family, and African memory. Emphasizing the role of Prince’s relationship with and separation from her family as well
as the role of Africa in establishing identity, Bracks seeks to identify Mary Prince the individual even while establishing her in the broader context of the African diaspora. While Bracks notes the influences of European editorial and cultural contexts, she nonetheless retains a focus on Prince’s “unique voice”: “Much of what Mary Prince tells in her narrative is tempered by religious and abolitionist goals, but Mary’s unique voice can still be heard” (41). Similarly, Brenda F. Berrian suggests, “Although The History of Mary Prince was structured and edited for use as propaganda for the Anti-Slavery Movement in Britain, Prince attempts to assert herself and to reflect her presence and her place” (200). For Bracks, evidence of this voice comes through in depictions of the tortures suffered under slavery: “There are passages recounting atrocities done to others as well as to Mary, for instance, that appear consistent with Mary’s behavior toward exposing inhumanity and brutality in securing black people’s freedom” (41–42). These passages are, as Bracks suggests, significant to Prince’s project of condemning the horrors of slavery. However, decrying the slavery institution was the Anti-Slavery Society’s agenda as well. In relaying scenes of brutality, Prince does not speak alone but as a representative example of what the Society was trying to bring to English citizens’ attention. Accordingly, the voice in her narrative does not constitute half of an either/or dichotomy with “religious and abolitionist goals” on one side and her own “unique voice” on the other. Rather, they mutually and simultaneously construct and complicate each other.

Another tendency in the appeal to voice in the History is to generalize its implications and relegate an individual voice to platitudes. There is an attendant nod to the editorial and cultural layers of influence on the text; however, these are seen as secondary to what is considered to be a woman’s “true” voice. For instance, in “The Heartbeat of a West Indian Slave,” Sandra Pouchet Paquet admits that “issues of voice and identity are complex” in Prince’s History and that “religious prohibitions . . . and legal liabilities . . . placed further constraints on Mary Prince’s individual voice” (131). “Yet,” Paquet continues, “her narrative retains a qualitative uniqueness that is distinctly West Indian, distinctly a black woman’s, and distinctly a slave’s” (131). Paquet further appeals to a notion of Prince’s “distinct voice” and suggests that “In the context of the region’s historical quest for freedom and independence, [Prince’s] contextualized and transformed literate voice emerges as a gender-specific, all-inclusive ancestral voice” (131–32). Paquet is right to call attention to the “circumstances governing the textual production of Mary Prince’s narrative”; nonetheless, the idea of “distinctly” singular and identifiable ethnic
and gendered categorizations (e.g., “West Indian,” “black woman,” and “slave”) is limiting (131). To insist upon an individual voice and simultaneously use that voice to speak for an entire collective is to reduce dynamic signs like “race,” “gender,” and “work” to fixed categories. Speaking as a slave certainly does not suggest that Prince somehow speaks for a universal African diaspora or a general slave experience. While Prince’s narrative undoubtedly carried far-reaching implications for nineteenth-century British society, it remains instructive as one woman’s journey across societal expectations and faulty identity constructs that such expectations employ.

In her essay “‘I Will Say the Truth to the English People’: The History of Mary Prince and the Meaning of English History,” Kremena Todorova provides a useful overview of critical emphasis on voice:

Most of the History’s contemporary critics focus on the ex-slave’s agency in the proliferation of voices in her narrative. “A delightful book that should be widely used in schools etc., as well as women’s history classes,” announces Joan Grant (1988) who hails Mary Prince unconditionally as “a spokeswoman for Black people in Britain and the Caribbean.” “The heteroglot voices compete with but do not dominate Mary Prince’s fully integrated sense of self,” declares Sandra Paquet in her 1992 article, emphasizing the connection critics usually draw between the authenticity of the ex-slave’s voice and the success of the book as an anti-colonialist piece of writing. Moira Ferguson calls her introduction to the 1987 and 1997 reprints of the book “The Voice of Freedom: Mary Prince,” even though she is not quite as straightforward in her praise of Prince’s autonomous voice as Grant. (285–86)

Departing from such emphases and focusing instead on the sociohistorical implications of the text’s publication, Todorova argues “that the History’s publication event does not simply suppress or authorize the ex-slave’s voice, but manifests cultural anxieties about Britain’s imperial project that became particularly intense by 1831, shortly before slavery was abolished” (287).

While my own interests lie more in the consequences of movement and migration than in historicized “cultural anxieties,” I do think that Todorova’s critical shift away from personal authenticity in the narrative is a productive one. Certainly the History marks a significant moment in British society, especially as it was published only two years before passage of the Emancipation Bill. My focus on the cultural influences and
surroundings conditioning the *History* is limited to the ways that contexts provide layers of separation between Mary Prince and her story. Sharpe rightly notes that a fuller portrait of Mary Prince comes from intersections and interrogations of not only Prince’s narrative but also pro-slavery documents and court proceedings regarding her manumission and character. Such legal archives speak more directly to issues this chapter takes up, namely the ways in which the rhetorics of character and respectability imbue discussions of gender and work.

Whitlock addresses the historical and critical calls for Prince’s authentic voice with a comparative look at two editors of her story, Thomas Pringle, who oversaw the first printing, and Moira Ferguson, who revisited the narrative in 1987: “As Pringle desired Prince to speak as an authentic subject for abolitionist rhetoric, so Ferguson desires to return to the *History*, to ‘Mary’s own lips,’ and exhume the independent, authentic subject pursued by late twentieth-century feminism” (32). Whitlock very rightly notes that the Mary Prince of contemporary readerships is just as much a contrivance as the one “stage-managed by Pringle” (32). She describes the conventional Mary Prince as follows: “This subject has agency; this subject is able to surmount all the prefaces, introductions, apologias, diatribes that encrust the text and establish her own domain, autonomous and independent, an essence free of the text” (32). Uncritically reading the narrative of this authentic subject, according to Whitlock, “is less restricting only if we accept that it is the implications of sexual abuse, the installation of a sexual history, which lend truth to the *History* and amplification to the self” (32). While female subjectivity should not be thought to be produced solely through sexual roles, such “amplification” nonetheless allows for a more inclusive reading that would invite comparative analyses of Prince’s *History* and twentieth-century texts that present women in various spaces of gender and labor.

**CONSTRUCTING “CHARACTER”: EXPECTATIONS OF GENDER PERFORMANCE**

While in the Caribbean, Prince experiences a series of important migrations. She begins in Bermuda with the Williams family, but is then sold to Captain I—at Spanish Point. She runs away and returns to her mother, but her father returns her to her owner. Five years later, “to [her] great joy,” she is sent to Turk’s Island and sold to Mr. D— (197). There she works in salt ponds shoveling and harvesting salt. While she hopes the
migration would signal a positive shift, she “found it was but going from one butcher to another” (198). She draws attention to the relationship between labor and place, suggesting “Work—work—work—Oh that Turk’s Island was a horrible place! The people in England, I am sure, have never found out what is carried on there” (199). She makes a rhetorical nod here to British sensibilities, suggesting that the good people of England would never have let these practices continue if they had only known about them. After ten years working in the salt ponds, she returns home to Bermuda when Mr. D— goes back to a house he owns.

Prince is again hopeful: “I was sick, sick of Turk’s Island, and my heart yearned to see my native place again, my mother and my kindred” (201). Mr. D— is so intolerable, though, that she asks to be sold to Mr. Wood so that she can travel with him to Antigua. It is in Antigua that she meets and marries her husband Daniel James and joins a Moravian church. It is also where she ultimately departs for England with the Woods. She casts the migration to England in terms that would appeal to English respectability: “I was willing to come to England; I thought that by going there I should probably get cured of my rheumatism, and should return with my master and mistress, quite well, to my husband” (208). She attempts to prove herself a devoted worker and wife, wanting only to get well so that she might be of use to her master and husband.

Sharpe uses the idea of one’s contradictory status, referencing Frederick Douglass’s statement of being at once a slave and not a slave, to “offe[r] an alternative to addressing the slave woman as either a victim to be saved or an enlightened individual” (“‘Something’” 36). Certainly the discussions of gender and sexual labor, both in Prince’s disruptions of masters’ power through relationships with white men and in her deliberate silences to retain a sense of feminine integrity, showcase her contradictory status between liberation and repression. Specifically, Mary Prince’s migrations and how they complicate her subject “position” raise several important questions about the ways that categories begin to get disrupted.

Whitlock notes that all documents dealing with Prince’s sexual exploitation at the hands of white men or relating to her sexual character are supplementary and are placed outside her actual narrative. In this sense, there are two stories of Mary Prince, one that attends to the nineteenth-century societal call for a certain feminine appropriateness, and one that reveals a different extent to which sexuality played an important role for slave women. Significantly freighted with any discussion of her body and
how it was used sexually is a rhetoric of shame, a rhetoric that suggests an appreciation of a very specific audience, and code of conduct.

Sexuality, in the case of Prince’s narrative, has much to do with the status of a discourse on work. Thus, another way that categories are destabilized as singular entities is the degree to which sexuality and labor mutually construct each other and figure Prince’s narrative ethos. Lean’tin Bracks notes that “Caribbean slaves had more opportunities for participating in their own maintenance than did North American slaves and had access to forming more self-contained societies” (30). She goes on to refer to what Michael Mullin calls “the dynamic internal markets dominated by slave women” (qtd. in Bracks 30). Thus, Prince’s buying, selling, and trading in town, as well as her portrayals of specific tasks she performed for her owners, are instructive to a reading of how labor and autonomy work to construct and complicate each other. Bracks points out that “Prince’s narrative . . . is reflective of the working slave woman’s experience, which broadens our understanding of the variety of individual responses to oppression, the wide range in acts of slave resistance, and the complex processes women slaves engaged in to achieve self-definition” (30).

Once in England and able to leave her master’s home, Prince speculates on her potential freedom, decidedly obscuring the word’s very meaning. The new country confronts her with overlapping societal constraints. She states, when Wood presents her with a false option, “I also said . . . that I was sorry I had come from Antigua [to England], since mistress would work me so hard . . . Mr. and Mrs. Wood, when they heard this, rose up in a passion against me. They opened the door and bade me get out” (209). Prince’s anxiety is not merely about hard work. Locative anxieties factor as key elements of her fear. She continues, “But I was a stranger, and did not know one door in the street from another, and was unwilling to go away” (209). The slavery/freedom dichotomy does not fit Prince’s framework. She is unable to dwell as either enslaved or emancipated. She hovers, instead, in a both/and context of duality and flux. She is a slave in the Woods’ household, yet is nonetheless “unwilling to go away.” Being turned out into free society presents its own risks and limitations. The move away is one she resists as long as she can until she is left with virtually no choice. Significant to my own analysis is how Prince’s migrations serve to destabilize a transcendent concept of freedom. For Prince, her would-be freedom is not simply a matter of being or not being enslaved.
CONSTRUCTING FEMININE RESPECTABILITY

The supplementary material provided by Prince’s editor shapes a particular vision of gender performance that sells Prince with all the best traits of nineteenth-century femininity—she is well behaved, mild mannered, and of good character. Pringle, who describes himself as “her advocate with the public,” cannot effectively relay his emancipation agenda without presenting a woman worth emancipating (225). Thus, alongside the smatterings of post-Enlightenment appeals to the corruption of institutions and qualities of individuals, he rhetorically focuses on conventions of womanhood. Letters from Prince’s past master, John Wood, uses the same rhetoric but with a different slant. Wood depicts Prince as unruly and unmanageable—a “wild woman” effectively stripped of any “lady-like” qualities. In order to provide a reading of the ways in which something called gender is at work in the narrative, therefore, a dual analysis is necessary, one that first looks at how supplementary material projects a category, and then looks at how the shape of a text dismantles this projection.

Throughout the supplementary text, Pringle refers to Prince with some form of the phrase “the woman” (e.g., “the bondwoman,” “the Negro-woman,” “the poor woman”) approximately twenty times. These references present Prince as a representative of the most appealing kind of woman to male-centered Anglo society—a woman in need. However, Pringle works to make his audience understand that she is not simply needy—she is also worthy of help and compassion. He emphasizes Prince’s religious faith, her dutiful compliance, and her humility. After providing written accounts of other people’s experiences with Prince and her master, Pringle offers his own insights, his “own testimony in behalf of this negro woman” (230). He introduces their association as follows:

Independently of the scrutiny, which, as Secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society, I made into her case when she applied for assistance . . . and the watchful eye I kept upon her conduct for the ensuing twelvemonths, while she was the occasional pensioner of the Society, I have now had the opportunity of closely observing her conduct for fourteen months, in the situation of a domestic servant in my own family; and the following is the deliberate opinion of Mary’s character, formed not only by myself, but also by my wife and sister-in-law, after this ample period of observation. We have found her perfectly honest and trustworthy in all respects. (230)
While Pringle attests to his ability to keep Prince under “watchful eye,” his wife and sister-in-law are the ones who give credibility to his judgment. They are key arbiters, as male assessment is seen as tenuous or questionable. He keeps the same order in his description of Prince’s character. He first outlines how she handled domestic duties placed in her care, then moves to a depiction of her feminine attributes. Focusing on her abilities, he states, “She had the entire charge of the house . . . and conducted herself in that charge with the utmost discretion and fidelity. She is not, it is true, a very expert housemaid, nor capable of much hard work, (for her constitution appears to be a good deal broken) but she is careful, industrious, and anxious to do her duty and to give satisfaction” (230). Here, the emphasis is on industry and duty rather than “inner qualities” that receive feedback from his wife and sister-in-law. He goes on to describe the feminized qualities of Prince’s character:

She is capable of strong attachments, and feels deep, though unobtrusive, gratitude for real kindness shown her. She possesses considerable natural sense, and has much quickness of observation and discrimination of character. She is remarkable for 
\textit{decency} and \textit{propriety} of conduct—and her \textit{delicacy}, even in trifling minutiae, has been a trait of special remark by the females of my family. (230, emphasis mine)

The focus here is on innate properties, a so-called natural sense that feeds an emotional, grateful, and delicate presentation of Prince.

John Wood, Prince’s master when she arrives in England, has much to say in response to Pringle’s requests that he grant her manumission. In keeping with conventional nineteenth-century views on female subjec-
tivity, much of his rhetoric treats the same foci as Pringle’s—the \textit{character} of Mary Prince. In a letter offering his rationale for maintaining his legal hold on Prince in Antigua, he casts the general situation in moral and place terms. It is not merely a question of Prince’s freedom—it is a question of her return to Antigua as a free woman. He makes the distinction thus:

There are many and powerful reasons for inducing me to refuse my sanc-
tion to her returning here in the way she seems to wish. It would be to reward the worst species of ingratitude, and subject myself to insult whenever she came in my way. Her moral character is very bad, as the police records will shew; and she would be a very troublesome character should she come here without any restraint. (220)
Wood follows this critique by noting, “She is not a native of this country, and I know of no relation she has here” (220).

Exposing Prince as a foreigner, an outsider who has no “real place” in England, Wood submits place as a key agent in deciphering Mary Prince’s character. Depending on her geographical and cultural context, the codes of conduct and racial expectations, gender, and work shift. The very constructions of gender and labor for a diasporic slave woman are revealed as slippery formations that must be constantly reiterated and corralled in order to maintain place. Prince is a figure who begins to reshape and unsettle notions of fixed, authentic, moral character determined by gender and work.

“Appropriate” gender is not isolated in its performance, however. It occurs in combination with other facets of identification that unavoidably make their way even into Pringle’s supplement. In describing his desire that John Wood free Prince, Pringle notes, “Some faint hope was still cherished that this unconscionable man would at length relent, and ‘in his own time and way,’ grant the prayer of the exiled negro woman” (219). By invoking the “prayer of the exiled negro woman,” Pringle speaks to Prince’s Christian piety, place, race, and gender. All of these play a role in shaping Prince as both a paradigm of British respectability and a symbol of slavery’s consequences. Thus, Prince is neither fully one nor the other, yet she is both. What are the authorial and vocative implications for a woman’s self-story when caught between male interlocutors?

“VOLATILE COLLECTIVITIES”: GENDER ALLIANCES

A significant space of contradiction lies in the companionship established on gendered bases. Prince transgresses boundaries of power by forming close bonds to one of her mistresses, but she also develops deep ties with other marginalized women who help her read her experiences. As she destabilizes racialized power discrepancies, she also comes closer to “understand[ing] rightly [her] condition” through the stories of other women likewise enslaved or ostracized.

Important to note before a discussion of relationships seen within the text itself is the association between Mary Prince and her amanuensis, Susanna Strickland. This tie is critical. It offers a certain Anglo-authenticity to Prince’s otherwise unseemly experiences. It also suggests a revised voice for Prince—her story heard, but put through a very specific filter to make it appealing and appropriate to English audiences. In *The Intimate*
Empire, Gillian Whitlock examines this relationship with an eye to its effects on Prince’s text as “autobiography.” Whitlock identifies the major culturally racialized and gendered distinctions between the two women: “[Strickland] is . . . in every sense Prince’s foil: the white English woman who is able to embody the precepts of femininity, domestic respectability and innocent womanhood, an Englishness that casts Prince as ‘the other woman’” (17). Thus, the very conduit for Prince’s voice is also what indelibly stamps its otherness. Whitlock goes on to explain the symbolic representations of differing ethos:

The amanuensis embodies at the scene of writing the epitome of English womanhood as it was understood in terms of the cult of domesticity. As a young, unmarried woman recently converted to Methodism, Strickland is an innocent scribe. On the other hand, Prince has to tell a story of degradation and punishment, a history about things of which she herself has been “too ashamed to speak” on occasion. (20)

The question for Whitlock is, “How is decency preserved here?” (20). With all of the editorial tensions and limitations, she wonders, “where does Prince find room for maneuver in the text?” (20). One way, she suggests, comes in the form of Prince’s description of Strickland at the end of her narrative as “my good friend” (Prince 214). “Here,” writes Whitlock, “the scribe works to and for Prince; the allusion to friendship . . . stresses the sense of equality and alliance in their relationship” (20). Of course, there remains only a sense of equality, as this gendered alliance is both constructed and complicated by race and class. Whitlock continues, “no simple equation can be made . . . on the basis of . . . gender alone” (26). However, she goes on, “Nor can we establish a relationship . . . by recourse to terms of doubled, tripled colonizations of women. Race, gender, class and nation have imprinted their bodies in very different ways” (26). Whitlock employs Denise Riley’s notion of a “volatile collectivity,” which she summarizes thusly: “Female persons . . . can be very differently positioned so that the apparent continuity of the subject ‘women’ isn’t to be relied on” (26). She applies this, then, to Prince and her relationship with Strickland:

Riley’s idea of the volatile collectivity of women alerts us to instability and change not only across the range of women’s experiences but also within the life of the individual. Characterizations of women vary historically and socially between women and within the life history of one
woman. Mary Prince and her amanuensis are forceful examples of how women are positioned very differently synchronically, and how carefully they must negotiate access to the public at any one time. They also remind us . . . that women’s access to the status of autobiographer is negotiated through a passage from which subjectivity emerges bearing the imprints of experience and culture, self and society. The body is always embedded in history. (26)

The notion of a volatile collectivity is certainly, as Whitlock suggests, at work within Mary Prince’s relationship with Susanna Strickland. It is also present in analogous ways, as I argue throughout this book, in Their Eyes Were Watching God, Mama Day, and I, Tituba. Tracing the ways that gendered collectives navigate multilayered concerns of class and race is key to understanding voice as a process rather than a fixed entity in autobiographical and first-person migration narratives.

This sort of multilayered relationship between women can be found within Prince’s narrative itself as well, and it signals an important role that gender camaraderie plays in highlighting the ways in which categories might be complicated. Prince’s relationship with and feelings for her first mistress, Mrs. Williams, works to forge a close bond. Mrs. Williams is terrified of her husband, forming alliances with Prince on a level of shared gender oppression. Prince describes her master as “a very harsh, selfish man,” noting that “during his stay at home, [his wife] seldom dared to shew her usual kindness to the slaves” (188). Here again is an instance in which Prince refers to not only the cruelty but also the licentiousness of her master. After her description of him as “a very harsh, selfish man,” she adds, “He often left [his wife], in the most distressed circumstances, to reside in other female society, at some place in the West Indies of which I have forgot the name” (188). His own sexual behavior—his “residing in other female society”—suggests a certain degree of danger for Prince. Nonetheless, her rhetorical focus is directed toward Mrs. Williams. She suggests that “all her slaves loved and pitied her,” Prince herself referring to Williams as “my poor mistress” (188). Prince is quick to position her gendered connection to her mistress in contradistinction to racial alterity:

I was truly attached to her, and, next to my own mother, loved her better than any creature in the world. My obedience to her commands was cheerfully given: it sprung solely from the affection I felt for her, and not from fear of the power which the white people’s law had given her over me. (188)
In this sense, Mrs. Williams fashions a familial bond with Prince. In her discussion of Mrs. Williams, Prince thus admits devotion to the very system of gendered companionship and devotion that would reject her on the level of race and station. She does not focus on her own danger, deferring to the prototype of respectable, white womanhood that society recognized as worth protecting. This gender negotiation reappears in a sort of volatile collective with the novels to be discussed in the chapters that follow, with deliberate usages of tropes like “a woman’s work,” in the case of Their Eyes, “southern womanhood” in Mama Day, and “witchcraft” in I, Tituba.

Jenny Sharpe discusses the politics of Prince’s relationship to Williams. Certainly the emphasis on the kindness of a mistress “demonstrate[s] that they are not inherently cruel; rather, it is the system of slavery that corrupts them” ("Something" 39). It also “reassures readers that slaves will be loyal and obedient servants so long as they are treated well” (39). In addition to this compliance with both abolitionist and pro-slavery emphases on appropriate behavior, however, is a significantly gendered alliance that unsettles fixed constructs of race and gender within slavery contexts. Significantly, Prince’s discussion of Williams appears beside that of her removal to another master and the separation of her family. Thus the productive disruption of racial power relations occurs within the very migrations that mitigate it.

Here, and in the various novels I discuss, these telling relationships among women likewise occur on levels where power differentiations are not quite as obvious. For Mary Prince, an important example lies in Hetty. An important parallel gendered alliance occurs in Condé’s I, Tituba, where Tituba shares a prison cell with Hester Prynne. In both cases, the women connect not only in terms of a mutual or shared oppression but also on important levels of gender performance. Hetty dies prematurely, leaving an extremely powerful mark on Prince. When she newly arrives on Captain I—’s plantation, Prince forms a quick closeness with “a French Black called Hetty” who cares for Prince, offering her food and bedding (193). Prince responds with intrigued observation of Hetty’s work, remembering, “She was the most active woman I ever saw and she was tasked to her utmost . . . I liked to look at her and watch all her doings, for hers was the only friendly face I had as yet seen, and I felt glad that she was there” (193). When Captain I— beats Hetty, Prince cannot help but fear for her own life, their relationship forming on the levels of both gender and corporeality. She states, “I sat up on my blanket, trembling with terror, like a frightened hound, and thinking that my turn
would come next” (193). The abuses inflicted on Hetty’s body necessarily transfer at least imaginatively to Prince’s.

Hetty, like Hester, is pregnant, and meets an early death. When a cow gets loose, Captain I—whips her severely. Her child is stillborn, and she never fully recovers. Prince describes how her reaction differed from that of the other slaves when Hetty dies soon after:

Ere long her body and limbs swelled to a great size; and she lay on a mat in the kitchen, till the water burst out of her body and she died. All the slaves said that death was a good thing for poor Hetty; but I cried very much for her death. The manner of it filled me with horror. I could not bear to think about it; yet it was always present to my mind for many a day. (195)

After the death, Prince again aligns herself with Hetty, this time on the level of labor. Prince becomes responsible for all of Hetty’s work, leading her ultimately to desire another connection with her lost friend: “After Hetty died all her labours fell upon me, in addition to my own . . . There was no end to my toils—no end to my blows. 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” (195). Prince does not end on this desire for death. She instead goes on to say, “But the hand of God whom then I knew not, was stretched over me; and I was mercifully preserved for better things” (195). This reference to God’s mercy is another appeal to her audience, as most Christian readers would certainly not have responded to suicidal thoughts with sympathy.

THE WORK BODIES DO: LABOR AND CORPOREALITY

The enforcement in the text of particular kinds of feminization often occurs in the context of “a woman’s work,” a notion that reappears dramatically in the novels I discuss in the chapters that follow. Therefore, a substantive analysis of gender in Prince’s narrative should be coextensive with a discussion of women’s labor. Like the emphases on femininity and character that arise in the supplementary material as fixed monoliths but move through the narrative as fluid constructs, work is an ambivalent presence in the text. In the supplement, Prince’s work appears as an uninterrogated (but certainly gendered and subject to critique) fact of the circumstantial matter; however, it is a volatile force in her narrative. First of all, her discussion of domestic duties alongside her portrayal of hard
manual labor offer a complex portrait of what she, as a woman and as a slave, is expected to do. She sells and trades outside her hours of slave labor in order to save her own money and gain a small sense of autonomy. Even with regard to her own position, she makes use of her masters’ views of her as property, mentioning who has offered to buy her and for how much in order to manipulate attitude and outcome. What I wish to emphasize, however, is the ways in which sexuality and work coalesce in the text, despite—and even through—the deliberate omissions of material deemed inappropriate by editorial prudence. I turn first to Thomas Pringle’s supplement, followed by a reading of the narrative itself.

Pringle makes frequent mention of slave labor as a key part of the destructive nature, or what he calls the “spirit,” of slavery. Prince’s narrative, Pringle suggests, is “a most instructive illustration of the true spirit of the slave system, and of the pretensions of the slaveholders to assert, not merely their claims to a ‘vested right’ in the labour of their bondmen, but to an indefeasible property in them as their ‘absolute chattels’” (233). Pringle follows with how such claims of property rights play into concerns of gender and place in Wood’s personal resentment, noting that Wood “prefers losing entirely the full price of the slave, for the mere satisfaction of preventing a poor black woman from returning home to her husband!” (233).

It is no small matter that the legal documents and the letters between Pringle and Wood are the most ready sources of information and speculation about Prince vis-à-vis sexuality. Pringle spends a great deal of time refuting what become key in Prince’s legal battles, namely John Wood’s allegations of Prince’s sexual immorality. Significantly Pringle’s rebuttals are often aligned or justified with matters of domestic labor. He refers, for instance, to Wood’s accusations of her promiscuity:

[Wood] alleges that she was, before marriage, licentious, and even depraved in her conduct, and unfaithful to her husband afterwards. These are serious charges. But if true, or even partially true, how comes it that a person so correct in his family hours and arrangements as Mr. Wood professes to be, and who expresses so edifying a horror of licentiousness, could reconcile it to his conscience to keep in the bosom of his family so depraved, as well as so troublesome a character for at least thirteen years, and confide to her for long periods too the charge of his house and the care of his children. (223)

Prince’s work and her place in his domesticity are facts that run counter to Wood’s charge. Accordingly, Pringle uses the work that Prince does in
his own home as proof of her good character. He derives his knowledge of her integrity from his own scrutiny of her work abilities and ethic: “convinced from a twelvemonth’s observation of her conduct, that she was . . . a well-disposed and respectable woman; I engaged her . . . as a domestic servant . . . I am thus enabled to speak of her conduct and character with a degree of confidence I could not have otherwise done” (219). Her work provides him with evidentiary support for his recommendation, without which he “could not have otherwise” spoken for her.

Another line of defense for Pringle against allegations of sexual impropriety is context and place. Having been sent Prince’s narrative and Wood’s letter by Pringle and asked for a measured response, Joseph Phillips writes to Pringle from Antigua. He brings up rumors of Prince’s relationships and goes on to provide the rationale of context. He writes:

I have heard she had at a former period (previous to her marriage) a connexion with a white person, a Capt.—, which I have no doubt was broken off when she became seriously impressed with religion. But, at any rate, such connexions are so common, I might almost say universal, in our slave colonies that except by the missionaries and a few serious persons, they are considered, if faults at all, so very venial as scarcely to deserve the name of immorality. (227)

Thus, Prince is a product and member of two environments—the base context of slavery in the West Indies and a redemptive England. This spatial dichotomy, I suggest, is a key element allowing Pringle to use the rhetoric of character and morality in order to identify Prince as a person worth the British people’s time and thought. Certainly the Anti-Slavery Society had its political and philosophical sights set on emancipation. The conflation of this humanitarian ideal with a sociocultural ideal of appropriateness, however, requires a shift in emphasis. For Mary Prince to be not only the victim of brutal slave masters but also an example of upright womanhood, place must be at work. Educated British sensibilities must help “this poor woman,” as Pringle so often refers to her, by lifting her into a new stratum of social respectability. Mary Prince herself maintains an intense concentration on fulfilling societal expectations of how a woman should behave. This focus plays important dual roles. First, her assertion of feminine ideals efficiently contrasts with nineteenth-century stereotypes of Caribbean women as oversexed savages. Second, her deployment of the expected rhetoric works on a more subversive level to
disrupt stable ideas of authentic gender and labor performance espoused by white society.

In keeping with this depiction of Mary Prince on the right side of feminine conduct, Pringle includes an excerpt from Walsh’s “Notices of Brazil,” a work that he suggests “has vividly illustrated the true spirit of Negro Slavery” (235). Within this excerpt is an anecdote that uses rhetoric similar to John Wood’s in order to cast Prince as a sexually base “wild woman.” However, Walsh uses such rhetoric to describe a slave mistress, inverting the usual characterizations. His story proceeds as follows:

In the rear of our house was another, occupied by some women of bad character, who kept, as usual, several negro slaves. I was awoke early one morning by dismal cries, and . . . I saw in the back yard of the house, a black girl of about fourteen years old; before her stood her mistress, a white woman, with a large stick in her hand. She was undressed except her petticoat and chemise, which had fallen down and left her shoulders and bosom bare. Her hair was streaming behind, and every fierce and malevolent passion was depicted in her face. She . . . was the very representation of a fury. (236)

Here, the woman is not merely “the very representation of a fury,” but a strikingly sexualized representation at that. She appears in her underclothes, with her chest exposed and her hair “streaming behind” undone. The dehumanizing features of “bad character” here are overtly steeped in terms of unmanageable sexuality. For Pringle’s purposes, Prince represents a contrast to the corrupting influence of slavery. Pringle’s post-Enlightenment sensibilities lead him to focus on the institution rather than the individual as source of corruption—what he calls “the unquestionable tendency of the system . . . to vitiate the best tempers, and to harden the most feeling hearts” (234–35). The rhetoric of “character” thus carries on to Pringle’s thoughts on slavery itself. He notes that, while “the system of coercive labour” may be more or less extreme depending on where it is located—proving “more destructive to human life in the cane culture of Mauritius and Jamaica, than in the predial and domestic bondage of Bermuda or the Bahamas”—“the spirit and character of slavery are every where the same” (234). Work and place, then, shape the very “spirit and character of slavery” for Pringle; this is an equation that appears in the narrative itself. However, within Prince’s text, the most provocative discussions of work occur in what is edited and reworked
even as it appears on the page—the role of sexuality as coerced corporeal work.

As Prince is caught in a triangulation of gender, property, and slavery, her body often becomes the site of sexualized labor. In “‘Don’t Let Nobody Bother Yo’ Principle’: The Sexual Economy of American Slavery,” Adrienne Davis suggests, “enslaved women, and only enslaved women, were forced to perform sexual and reproductive labor to satisfy the economic, political, and personal interests of white men of the elite class” (107). While it is important to note the role that slave women played as sexual chattel, Davis’s is largely a heterosexist and gender-blind statement. That “only enslaved women” were sexually exploited is a claim that paints a very specific picture of what danger looks like. White women remain sexually innocuous and obsolete, as if black men were never threatened by their mistresses. Whether her sexuality is manifested in contexts of pleasure or coercion, Prince has telling inclusions and exclusions in her text that help interrogate a notion of authentic narrative voice. With an English audience and a specific societal notion of feminine respectability in mind, Mary Prince’s narrative elides the sexual abuse inflicted by her owner John Wood as well as her monetary earnings through her sexual relationships with white men like Captain Abbot (Sharpe, “Something” 32). Thus, Prince’s voice is necessarily linked to her sexuality, as there are omissions at the hands of Thomas Pringle, who agreed to publish the text, Susanna Strickland, who served as an amanuensis, and Prince herself.9

As I have shown, much of the discussion surrounding sexuality comes in the form of accusations made by her pro-slavery antagonists and the responses that Pringle gives in the supplementary material.10 However, there are also telling silences in her narrative that allow for an interrogation of not only complicated sexual constructs within the institution of slavery but also the role of textual production in the imaginative transference of such constructs. These factors are important when read in the context of the nineteenth century, in which stereotypes of appropriate femininity or womanhood abound even as women are, to use Hortense Spillers’s words, “ungendered” within slave societies.11 Sharpe points to the “paradoxical position of the slave woman as one who existed outside the structures of domesticity but had to uphold its ideals” (Ghosts 121). She suggests that such a position reveals “an inherent contradiction in the speaking subject of The History of Mary Prince”: “While having no self-autonomy as a slave, she was expected to exercise a sexual auton-
omy over her body” (Ghosts 121). Such “inherent contradiction” is what makes appealing to Prince’s authentic voice counterintuitive.

When Prince does offer some indication of sexual labor, it is laden with a severe sense of shame, again catering to an audience for whom her validity rests with an indication of appropriate female sexual behavior. This is the case, for instance, when she discusses the disgust she felt when bathing Mr. D—. She states, “He had an ugly fashion of stripping himself quite naked, and ordering me then to wash him . . . This was worse to me than all the licks. Sometimes when he called me to wash him I would not come, my eyes were so full of shame. He would then come to beat me” (202). Significantly, Prince relates his harsh (and in this case sexualized) demands in the broader context of their migration. She tells him as he is about to beat her, “Sir, this is not Turk’s Island,” finding the geographical change to be sufficient foundation from which to stand up to and critique his actions (202). She goes on to explain to her readers, “He wanted to treat me the same in Bermuda as he had done in Turk’s Island” (202). Critics of Prince’s narrative use her description of and reaction to her abuse as another opportunity to examine her voice.

Lean’tin Bracks suggests that instances in which Prince directly confronts her masters are evidence of the power of her voice. Bracks suggests, “While some forms of covert resistance among slaves consisted of stealing, dissembling, and arson, Mary moves beyond those responses to a more overt and politically aggressive stance. She progresses swiftly to a position of confrontation” (36). Immediately following her description of Mr. D—’s baths, Prince recalls a time that she is beaten for dropping dishes. This is the example that Bracks uses to signal Prince’s “position of confrontation.” Prince states her response to Mr. D— as follows: “He struck me so severely . . . that at last I defended myself . . . I 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” (202–3). I hesitate at Bracks’s notion that Prince “moves beyond” other means of resistance simply because hers is apparently more overt. Rather than exhibiting a moment of transcendence, there is a more particular significance to Prince’s confrontation in her emphasis on modesty and good moral behavior.

From the passage above, I would call attention to Prince’s description of her master as “a very indecent man—very spiteful, and too indecent; with no shame for his servants, no shame for his own flesh” (202–3). Thus, the reason she gives for her uprising is not a call for human rights
or a recoiling against basic mistreatment. Rather, it is a rebuke against what would classify to European sensibilities as “indecency” and a lack of “shame.” However, I do not believe that such a rebuke is, as Bracks suggests, simply or necessarily a “shrewd use of the politics of British colonial society” (36). She does not speak into a vacuous nondiscursive space, untouched by her surrounding societal influences. Important here is that Strickland is likewise silent about Prince’s untoward sexual encounters. Whitlock rightly points out that any information about sexual impropriety is kept from the text and left for the supplementary inclusions:

It is in Pringle’s supplementary materials that the issue of Prince’s relationship with a white man in Antigua is discussed and rationalized. It is there that Wood’s allegations of depravity and licentiousness are presented edited, given that they are “too indecent to appear in a publication likely to be perused by females.” The amanuensis does not copy these sections of the text. The section which Prince and Strickland do produce together is a strictly policed first-person narration, with no sexually compromising material. What we see here is “acceptable.” (20)

Whitlock suggests, then, that “this history of a slave is marked by race not gender” (20). That Strickland is not allowed to write such passages is important to a discussion of how and when Prince is capable of and stymied from manipulating rhetoric. What we see here is a broader societal imposition of “proper” codes of conduct and conversation for women in general. Rather, her travels make her a product of these same influences, and her political and rhetorical savvy do not necessarily preclude the possibility of her actually believing her master to be morally repugnant.

British society held not only sexual abuse but also broader physical violence in contempt as examples of immoral behavior. Even so, beatings in slavery contexts were nonetheless freighted with sexual undertones and implications: “Flogging, in a word, was anti-Christian. Worst of all, it was a public act, involving an exposed nakedness and an unsolicited male gaze sometimes even attracting spectators and enthusiasts” (qtd. in Whitlock 23). Chronicling her beatings serves another function as well: it provides her story with a certain degree of truth or seeming authenticity. Doing so speaks to the constructed nature of such notions, as Prince (or, more accurately, her amanuensis) literally creates the truth of her story in her relaying it. Using her abuse as a marker of narrative authenticity still takes her audience into account, of course. Furthermore, as Whitlock rightly notes, the interesting thing about Prince’s voice, in this case, is its
absence. Discussing examination of Prince’s body conducted by Strickland, Mary Pringle (Thomas Pringle’s wife), and others, Whitlock brings to the fore issues of what is able to be spoken and by whom with regard to racial and gendered oppression:

Here is a final grasp to assert truth on Prince’s behalf through a white reading of her body, through recourse to the marks of her history on her back. . . . Ultimately the inscriptions of flogging on the body of the Caribbean woman, a body made grotesque and painful by abuse, are what speak authentically to the good people of England. These marks are not spoken of by Mary herself, but by the amanuensis. (23)

Even in her authenticity here, however, Prince is resigned to an unavoidable alterity. Her “grotesque” difference is what proves the veracity of her story.

CONCLUSION: BEYOND “AUTHENTICITY”

Near the end of the History, Prince states, “The truth ought to be told of [the horrors of slavery]; 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” (200). Bracks argues that, in this quote, “Mary claims her right to speak as coming from her experience of great suffering. The authority of her own claims and her possession of truths regarding slavery are evident in her language and an emphatic use of ‘I’” (42). More is at work in her first-person rhetoric than the firm establishment of empowered voice, however. Important in her quote is that she sees her experiences and the “truth” about slavery as “my duty to relate.” The “I” here is made of various and shifting subject positions. What is firmly entrenched is Prince’s tie to a sense of duty even at the end of her narrative. Considerations of Prince and her narrative, therefore, cannot be teased apart from analyses of gendered, labor, and sexual positionalities.

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century novels in which women navigate identifications of race, gender, labor, and sexuality constructs in migratory societal contexts have an important literary conversation partner in The History of Mary Prince. For Mary Prince, something resembling an “authentic” voice is one of contradictions and ambiguities. Her text resists singular constructions of gender and corporeal labor dynamics.
She struggles throughout her narrative to “understand rightly [her] condition,” as she moves from slave to political representative. Presenting more options with which to enact and describe a marginalized female subject in migration, Mary Prince’s narrative offers much to contemporary dialogues that investigate hybrid female subjectivities, in the sphere of literary criticism as well as in feminist and postcolonial theories.