Western University
Scholarship@Western

2021 Undergraduate Awards The Undergraduate Awards

2021

Resisting Social Death: Collective Agency of the Enslaved in The History of Mary Prince

Akshi Chadha

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/undergradawards_2021

Resisting Social Death: Collective Agency of the Enslaved in *The History of Mary Prince*

Published in 1831, when the struggle for slave emancipation was at its peak, Mary Prince's *The History of Mary Prince* became a significant body of work within the Black Atlantic literature. This paper investigates how Prince's memoir exemplifies and resists the phenomenon of social death within enslavement. Social death was the outcome of the natal alienation suffered by the enslaved wherein they were prevented from making claims of birth and personhood or forging social relationships among themselves. Such estrangement from society perpetrated by the enslavers often meant legal, social, and physical death for millions of people of African descent. However, in some ways, considering social death to be the irrefutable result of enslavement inadvertently deemphasizes the resistance efforts of the enslaved and undermines their inherent agency by essentially accepting this reduced state of being that is imposed by white colonists. Through close reading and analysis, this paper argues that while the experience of enslavement was steeped in the impositions of social death, Prince's memoir is able to create a socio-political space to establish a collective voice that resists such impositions and attempts to recuperate lost culture and community. Prince exhibits a sense of personal responsibility in documenting the sufferings of other enslaved people while narrating her own estrangement and alienation. While the social circumstances of enslavement compel such a mobilization of testimonies to produce a rebellious collective voice, Prince's vehement indictment of slavery and her accommodation of marginalized voices also transforms the memoir into a community autoethnography. Thus, the memoir functions on two levels as it allows Prince to actualize a community within the text itself, even if said community is denied within the enslaver's society, and challenges colonial discourses on slavery by reclaiming narratives and resisting the pervasive forces of social death.

In 1831, Mary Prince became the first Black woman to publish her memoir, *The History of Mary Prince*, in England. Recognized as a significant contribution to the canon of the late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century Black writing, the *History* is unique as it not only provides a glimpse into Prince's life in enslavement but also the lives of people she encountered which might have remained obscured by a brutal history if not for her text. Born into enslavement, Prince narrates traumatizing fragments of her continuous displacement up to the time when she leaves for England with her enslavers in hopes of gaining her freedom. Upon her enslavers' refusal to emancipate her, Prince finds herself unable to return to Antigua and live with her husband and thus narrates *The History of Mary Prince* as an exile. In this essay, I investigate how Prince's memoir evinces the ways in which enslavement effects what Black sociologist Orlando Patterson terms as social death. Within slavery, while significant cultural distortion was inherent in being severed from one's home country, enslavers also imposed various forms of internal isolation to maintain a structure of dependency that prevented the enslaved from forming self-empowering social relations and such debilitation marked the social death of the enslaved. This essay argues that Prince counters such pervasive forces of social death by synthesizing a collective voice in her text that recognizes and uplifts obscured narratives by reuniting the voices of other enslaved people. Prince articulates this sense of solidarity first by voicing the struggle for both physical and figurative social space for Black people and second by including the lived experiences of others in her memoir. My intention is to emphasize a social identity in the text that takes shape around ideas of solidarity, inclusivity, resilience, and resistance, *against* any semblance of a racialized identity and estrangement imposed by the enslavers. This essay thus establishes that within the incapacitating structure of enslavement, which thrives on isolating Black people to further debase them and prevent them from mobilizing, the individual voicing the collective is able to share agency with those who are

unable to narrate their own experiences which, in turn, shapes within the text itself the inclusionary, self-empowering space that has been denied to enslaved individuals.

In his book, *Slavery and Social Death*, Orlando Patterson notes that the "natal alienation" intrinsic to enslavement, that is, the "incapacity to make any claims of birth or to pass on such claims, is considered a natural injustice among all peoples," and thus millions of people of African descent who were obliged to suffer such natal alienation had to be regarded as somehow socially dead (8). According to Patterson, "it was the slave's isolation, his strangeness, that made him valuable to the [enslaver]" (38). This process of desocialization and "othering" enabled enslavers to perpetuate an abusive structure of dependency wherein the enslaved were coerced into racialized identities and could only be recognized in subjection to their enslaver, inhibiting the scope of distinct personal lives. Patterson elaborates: "institutionalized marginality, the liminal state of social death, was the ultimate cultural outcome of the loss of natality as well as honour and power. It was in this too that the [enslaver's] authority rested" (46). The idea of social death explains the ways in which enslavement effected the erasure of social bonds and relationships among the enslaved by essentially delegitimizing such bonds. According to Black historian Vincent Brown, Patterson distills a "transhistorical characterization of slavery" in which enslavers "annihilated people socially by first extracting them from meaningful relationships that defined personal status and belonging, communal memory, and collective aspiration" and then incorporating these "socially dead persons" into the enslaver's oppressive society (Brown 1233). In this way, the idea of social death as a means of control became central to the racialization of enslaved Black people, threatening the erasure of their community and culture.

The History of Mary Prince very much attests to the phenomenon of social death within enslavement. In the memoir, Prince details at length how the enslaved are stripped of their

cultural identities, severed from their families and friends, and actively prevented from forming social relations. Instances of separation and displacement appear within the first few pages of Prince's narrative as she recounts the early experience of being sold by her family's enslaver. Prince relays mourning and dejection in the scene, saying: "The great God above alone knows the thoughts of the poor slave's heart, and the bitter pains which follow such separations as these. All that we love taken away from us—Oh, it is sad, sad!" (10). Through the phrase a "poor slave's heart," Prince establishes the grief of separation and isolation as inherent to slavery. She conveys how enslavement not only strips away individual autonomy but also irretrievably severs relationships, exposing political motives of social death. Prince also draws attention to her mother in this scene, who is perhaps more acquainted with the atrocities that are to follow after her children are separated and sold off. Putting her children in the new osnaburgs in which her they are to be sold, Prince's mother says: "I am *shrouding* my poor children; what a task for a mother...I am going to carry my little chickens to market...take your last look of them; maybe you will see them no more" (10). The statement conjures images of "shrouding" a corpse to prepare a dead body for burial, perhaps a sign of submission to the social death normalized within slavery. The notion is reinforced through the animal imagery of 'chickens being carried to the market,' symbolizing impending sale and slaughter. While Prince was enslaved upon being born, the family had managed to endure the injustices of enslavement together until this point. Prince echoes this sentiment as her sisters are separated from her: "I then saw my sisters led forth and sold to different owners; so that we had not the sad satisfaction of being partners in bondage" (12). The phrase "sad satisfaction" alludes to a complex respite provided by familial and social support within a debilitating structure. Prince ends the scene by saying: "It was a sad parting; one went one way, one another, and our poor mammy went home with nothing" (12). It becomes apparent hereafter in the narrative that leaving the enslaved with "nothing" is strategic

isolation effected by white enslavers, meant to perpetuate enslavement through the absolute debilitation of the enslaved.

As the memoir progresses, the struggle for 'society' is embodied by Black people's struggle for social space. After leaving Turk's Island, Prince relays how some enslaved people had previously built "a place with boughs and leaves, where they might meet for prayers, but the white people pulled it down twice, and would not allow them even a shed for prayers" (23). Denial of an inclusive space, where Black people might reconstitute and reprise lost society and culture is significant. As the institution of slavery rests on erasure and social death, the denial of access to society is meant to isolate Black people to the point of self-negation. With such loss of personhood, the enslaved potentially cannot help but identify with their racialization and enslavement and might begin to view themselves as socially dead as well. Disenfranchising enslaved Africans by divorcing them from each other, in this context then, arises from a systemic strategy to prevent any mobilization or rebellion. By detailing such instances, Prince negates any economic or moral justification for enslavement. Her testimony exposes how colonists recognized that slavery was unlawful and that this state of oppression could only be maintained by inflicting cultural and social death. To make sure the enslaved person remained tethered to an institution that existed through 'othering' them, white colonists first racialized enslaved people to make sure they could not identify with the enslavers who assumed power and then denied enslaved people the right to form helpful relationships among themselves to ensure submission through physical, mental, and emotional estrangement from society.

While Prince's memoir evinces the ways in which social death is perpetrated and embodied within enslavement, the idea of social death is only a "distillation" from Patterson's work— "it is a theoretical abstraction that is meant not to describe the lived experiences of the enslaved so much as to reduce them to a least common denominator that could reveal the essence

of slavery" (Brown 1233). Social death might accurately explain the psychology of the enslaver, but not the enslaved. In a way, to see social death as the inescapable verdict of slavery inadvertently deemphasizes the agency of the enslaved and reduces them to the same racialized identities which they are found resisting. In hopes of tracing the struggles and resistance of the enslaved, Brown contends that rather than "pathologizing slaves by allowing the condition of social death to stand for the experience of life in slavery" it might be more helpful to focus on the efforts of the enslaved to forge communities and meaningful relationships despite the inflicted isolation and decreed social death (1236). Brown asks: What if we treated agency, not as a thing to be "discovered" or prescribed by historians and authorities but rather as "an aspect of existence to be assumed" even under the barest of conditions (1246)? In doing so, Brown views "social death as a productive peril"—a view that causes a shift in perspective, "from seeing 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" (1248). Such a view is not only a symbolic gesture to amplify resistance efforts ubiquitous in slave narratives but also a means of subversion. The emphasis here shifts from the racialization and social death enforced by the enslaver to the enslaved person's sense of self and community where they do not view themselves from the enslaver's perspective, that is, they do not consider themselves socially dead but rather continuously resist such an assault on their personhood.

Taking up Brown's view of social death as the peril against which political rebellion takes effect highlights ideas of communal resistance in Prince's memoir as she exhibits a sense of personal responsibility in giving other Black people a space in her memoir. Prince's *History* not only gives physical and metaphorical space to individuals who have been estranged and tortured within enslavement, but it also forges a self-empowering sense of community within the

text itself, even if the said community is not allowed to exist and thrive within the enslaver's society. In her book *Black Cosmopolitanism*, Iffeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo sees Prince's text as projecting a collective consciousness wherein Prince "speaks often of herself and her fellow slaves as a collective whose members share the same emotions, experiences, and dreams" (164). Nwankwo notes that in various instances Prince employs first-person plural and "details at length how "we" worked, what "we" did, what "we" were given to eat and all that "we" experienced" (165). Prince thus clearly embraces "both the idea of a [B]lack community and the need for the members consciously to manifest and act on that notion of community" (166). For instance, Prince details various occurrences where she witnessed enslaved people die owing to the physical and emotional torture inflicted by the enslavers. Once she talks about how her enslaver's son, Dickey, abuses an old woman with a disability by "beating her severely" and flinging her among "prickly-pear bushes" with venomous thorns, causing her death (22). Prince relays why she feels it is important for her to note this excruciating instance, saying: "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 statement conveys a sense of responsibility to aim her advocacy not only towards herself but also to make space and acquire justice for those who could not survive the institution. Viewing "social condition as a bond" itself, Prince thus establishes an affinity with all Black people whom she might have encountered and witnessed being tortured in similar ways, a gesture which gives rise to a potent collective voice within her text (Nwankwo 164).

It is important to emphasize that while this affinity is based on shared "griefs" and lived experiences, it connotes a collective voice that is meant to counter oppressive racial categorizations. The social death of the enslaved is meant to ensure that they succumb to the racialized identities defined and controlled by the enslavers. However, the way Prince articulates

solidarity in her text not only transcends the requirement of any authorization from enslavers but also rejects the very institutions that coerce Black people into internalizing a racialized identity. The term "slave" in the memoir is always accompanied by the testimony of the abysmal lived experiences wrought by that imposed term. Consequently, the term "fellow-slaves" when employed by Prince self-referentially—where the self also represents the collective—allows enslaved voices to mobilize and reclaim the racialized term only to dismantle it by voicing the legal, social, and physical death that defines the term. By providing space to individuals who are unable to tell their stories or those who have succumbed to enslavement, Prince extends to these individuals the agency inherent in externalizing her story about the horrors of enslavement, however mediated or limited this agency might be. It remains a significant gesture of solidarity that negates the deliberate divisive efforts of white colonists while creating a social space for reuniting Black voices. Together, these voices are able to solidify the abolitionist and anti-racist sentiments of the text by exposing the realities of enslavement concealed or glossed over by imperialists to preserve the institution.

Jennifer L. Morgan notes that because enslaved people's lives existed inside the marketplace, whenever they "claimed the prerogatives of private life, those claims were necessarily rendered as sites of conflict and therefore deeply political...because they fundamentally disrupted the distinct oppositional spaces of commerce and family on which whiteness was coming to rest" (233). As Prince speaks of her marignalization and alienation from the position of both a victim and a witness, her *History* gradually becomes a socio-political space that mobilizes enslaved voices to effect solidarity and kinship while challenging colonial perspectives on slavery by actualizing the lives that are so easily obscured under the impositions of social death. Nwankwo suggests that *The History of Mary Prince* is an "autoethnography of a community" and in that sense, the collective consciousness in Prince's text is not only a gesture

of reclamation, but also a refutation of misconceptions surrounding the horrors of enslavement. Traditional ethnographic texts tend to centre the views of white Europeans on other communities, thereby contributing to a hegemony wherein a dominant group has the power to alienate and control the perception surrounding said communities. In relation, community autoethnography is "a text produced by the "othered" both to tell the story of the community and to talk back to the dominant discourse on the group" (Nwankwo 167). In this way, as Prince convenes the various lives affected by slavery within her text to forge a communal space and a collective voice, the voices she preserves and amplifies also help establish the text as a community autoethnography meant to counter racialization and social death. Prince repeatedly notes that she *knows* what slaves experience and in that sense her entire account of suffering—whether her own or someone else's—is an indictment of the inhumane institution of slavery which continued on during her time partly under the guise of amelioration. Thus, as she reclaims the right to private life and community by conjoining enslaved lives within her memoir, Prince also simultaneously indicates that these rights and privileges, considered a natural aspect of existence, have *indeed* been denied to the enslaved—that enslavement is nothing but social massacre, neither enhanced nor justified by claims of amelioration.

The pursuit of social spaces and recognition remains a persistent political theme in Prince's memoir. She relates how once at Date Hill she is invited by a fellow enslaved Black woman to join her and her husband at a Methodist meeting. Prince recounts how there she found "the first prayers she ever understood," alluding to a burgeoning sense of belongingness (28). Prince also details how her friend's husband, Henry, confesses that he treats "slaves cruelly" because he is "compelled" by his enslaver to do so and asks for forgiveness from God and the group of Black people present (28). Although the anecdote is brief, Prince's focus on Henry's confession not only amplifies his personal story but also signifies the importance of having a

community that understands one's lived experiences, especially within the isolating structure of slavery. Patterson notes that because the enslaved people's kin relationships were deemed illegitimate, they were all the more cherished— "because [they were] considered degraded, [they were] all the more infused with the yearning for dignity...because of [their] formal isolation and liminality, [they were] acutely sensitive to the realities of community" (337). Henry's confession also further evinces how enslavers effected separation among enslaved Black people—often compelling them to torture one another in addition to the torture already inflicted by the enslavers. While Prince does not comment on the confession, it causes her to contemplate her own sins and ask God for forgiveness, potentially suggesting that the "sins" she is referring to might be similar. As Vincent Brown notes, the activities of the enslaved can be more easily understood "as having been compelled by the very conditions that [they] have been described as resisting. This would imply a politics of survival, existential struggle transcending resistance against enslavement" (1246). To narrate the extremes that one is coerced into for survival within slavery is perhaps a gesture to absolve fellow Black people of survivor's guilt while indicting the coercive institution itself that thrives on torture and division and limits any constructive social identities or relations among Black people. In this way, Prince again exemplifies the collective voice within her *History* by recognizing these obscured narratives that expose the varied realities of enslavement, allowing the memoir to unite these estranged voices while serving as the autoethnography of an unrecognized and victimized community.

The most significant social tie that Prince is able to form whilst enslaved is through her marriage with Daniel James. Prince meets James, a self-emancipated Black man, shortly after she starts attending the Moravian Church. A while after their meeting, Prince and James join in marriage in Moravian Chapel as they could not be married in an English Church for English marriage "is not allowed to slaves" (30). The mention of the marriage law here is significant

because we again find that the separation among enslaved people is strategic and systemic, enforced through laws to deny enslaved Black people any social recognition or connection, which, in turn, keeps them tethered to their enslavers as property. As Morgan notes, "the inability to protect private life—whether understood as the most intimate space of sexuality and corporeal integrity or as the more communal spaces of cultural practices—is indeed the hallmark of enslavement and enslavability" where the desocialized body is rendered as private property (233). When Prince's enslaver becomes aware of her marriage, he flies into "a great rage" and asks her husband "who gave him a right to marry a slave of his?"—an absurd question meant to enforce physical and social possession of Prince (30). James tells the enslaver that as a "free man" he believed he could marry anybody, but had he known Prince wasn't permitted to marry, "he should not have asked her" (30). James, in many ways rightfully so, potentially believes his autonomy, as a Black person with free legal status, would extend to his wife through the social union of marriage. The enslaver's wife, however, tells her husband to punish Prince who says: "I thought it very hard to be whipped at my time of life for getting a husband—I told her so" (30). Prince here calls into question the absurdity of the circumstance. She notes how the enslaver's wife says she won't allow James on the premises at which point Prince realizes that the wife is "fearful" that Prince "should lose her time" in order to do things for her husband (30). The idea resurfaces when the wife later asks Prince "who had put freedom into [her] head" and Prince answers: "To be free is very sweet" (31). The "who" is very telling as isolation is essentially meant to ensure the absence of influence, understanding, or encouragement in the lives of the enslaved. The question substantiates that slavery is perpetuated through social and cultural death to prevent mutual recognition of personhood and lived experiences and thus each time Prince recognizes her own or someone else's struggle for claiming their personhood, she resists the pervasive impositions of social death upon her community.

Prince's authorial resistance to the forces of social death rematerializes towards the end of the memoir where she solidifies the collective voice, speaking with and for the enslaved. Prince asks: "how can slaves be happy when they have the halter round their neck and the whip upon their back? and are disgraced and thought of no more than beasts? –and are separated from their mothers, and husbands, and children, and sisters, just as cattle are sold and separated?" (37). Of course, separation is an exacerbation—an extension of the misery that is inherent to the oppression of Black individuals and the statement becomes all the more telling as Prince speaks from the position of an exile who hopes to return home to her husband. Prince ends the memoir by incorporating her personal experience of slavery to effect solidarity, sharing her agency once more, saying: "I have been a slave myself—I know what slaves feel—I can tell by myself what other slaves feel, and by what they have told me" (38). Again, by using the term "slave" self-referentially, Prince emphasises the injustices of enslavement—physical and emotional torture, familial separation and estrangement, and loss of culture—embedded within that word, thereby dismantling and disempowering the term by exposing its true impositions. The "I" in Prince's statement is exclusionary towards white colonists—Prince's authority relays "an expectation that the subject under discussion is foreign to her audience"—revealing their inability to grasp the gravity of suffering inflicted by the system with which they are all complicit (Nwankwo 167). Whereas the echo of the community within the "I" rebels against dominant discourses and ethnographies that perpetuate lies and ignorance to coerce Black people into racialized identities and bind them to the institution of enslavement.

Prince's memoir is an unconventional autobiography—it is thirty-eight pages of testimonies and documented accounts of abuse, longing and struggle for kinship, and reprisal and resistance against the circumstances that compelled its conception. It is true that the narrative itself was potentially susceptible to filtration as Prince narrated *The History of Mary Prince* to

Susanna Strickland, a friend of Anti-Slavery Society Secretary Thomas Pringle who edited the memoir. It is possible that Pringle edited Prince's voice with his own purposes in mind, which supposedly leaned more towards amelioration rather than anti-imperialism and emancipation. Nevertheless, the sense of community, the collective voice vehemently indicting the institution of slavery and calling for emancipation, and the space of remembrance present in the memoir could have only been wrought by Prince herself as someone who shares, understands, and embodies the condition of enslavement—her authorial voice is politically potent because she is deeply embedded in the community she is articulating. Against the estrangement and racialization effected by enslavement and against the editorialization, Prince still manages to speak her and other people's truth, creating an inclusionary socio-political space of shared affinities, understood lived experiences, and reclaimed histories.

Works Cited

Brown, Vincent. "Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 114, no. 5, 2009, pp. 1231–1249. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/23303423. Accessed 1 May 2021.

Morgan, Jennifer L. *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic*. Duke University Press, 2021.

Nwankwo, Ifeoma Kiddoe. *Black Cosmopolitanism: Racial Consciousness and Transnational Identity in the Nineteenth-Century Americas*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005, doi:10.9783/9780812292121. Accessed 15 May 2021.

Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: a Comparative Study*. Harvard University Press, 1982.

Prince, Mary. *The History of Mary Prince*, edited by Sara Salih, Penguin, 2000.