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Voices of Reticence, Desire, and Resistance in *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave Related by Herself* (1831)

Abstract I: Il saggio propone una lettura dell'io narrante in *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave Related by Herself* (1831), *memoir* di una donna di origini africane che divenne schiava nelle colonie inglesi dei Caraibi. Il discorso critico ruota attorno alle questioni di *authorship*, *agency* e autenticità, concentrandosi, in primo luogo, sulla nozione di invisibilità del soggetto subalterno femminile, così come fu teorizzato da Gayatri Spivak. Dopo aver analizzato il binomio presenza-assenza di tale soggetto, il saggio affronterà le questioni suddette in relazione alla resistenza e resilienza espresse dal narratore e ricorrendo, in questo caso, al paradigma antifreudiano del desiderio e del corpo politico enunciato da Deleuze e Guattari.

Abstract II: The essay proposes a re-assessment of the multiple speaking voice in *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave Related by Herself* (1831), the memoir of an Afro-descendant woman who lived most of her life as a slave in the British West Indies. The argument revolves around issues of authorship, agency, and authenticity, which will be first examined in relation to Gayatri Spivak's concept of the invisibility of the female subaltern subject – the latter flexibly wavering in the text between presence and absence. Secondly, these issues and the narrator's related discourses of resistance and resilience will be investigated through Deleuze and Guattari's anti-Freudian paradigm of desire and body politic.

Keywords: *The History of Mary Prince*, reticence, desire, resistance, resilience, agency.

1. Introduction: Why Re-assess *The History of Mary Prince*?

Brutal and deplorable manifestations of racial discrimination, inequality and intolerance have been recently on the rise in various parts of the world. These episodes cannot be regarded merely as extremist responses to contingent historical phenomena such as globalization, mass migratory fluxes or post-9/11 resurging anxieties about racial and ethnic otherness. Contrary to what one would expect, contemporary history is still remarkably marred by the legacies of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century colonial exploitation, plantation economy, imperial subjugation and aberrant myths of national supremacy. The rise, from 2013 onwards, of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) American and

global movement, denouncing acts of violence perpetuated (largely by the police) against African Americans and black people around the world, provides a telling example. On 12 June 2020 the President and Executive of the British Association for Romantic Studies (BARS) published a statement following the murders of black people in the United States, in which, referring to the responsibilities of literary scholars, educators and intellectuals, it is claimed that "privilege must be used to amplify Black voices" (BARS Blog 2020). Pointing to the Romantic-period coexistence of reactionary and revolutionary forces, pro- and anti-slavery campaigns, this statement forcefully reminds us that the legacies of these clashing behaviours are still with us today.

By the same token, the history of slavery and the slave trade, as well as the ideological discourses underpinning them, did not come to an end with the 1807 and 1833 Parliamentary Acts, but, as Paul Gilroy shows in his magisterial *The Black Atlantic* (1993), they have left indelible stamps on (post)modernity, testifying to the centuries-long interconnections between apparently distant cultural histories such as those of the European nation-states and the transatlantic world. In Homi Bhabha's words,

> The Western metropole must confront its postcolonial history, told by its influx of migrants and refugees, as an indigenous or native narrative internal to its national identity; and the reason for this is made clear in the stammering, drunken words of Mr. 'Whisky' Sisoda from *The Satanic Verses*: "The trouble with the Engenglish is that their hiss hiss history happened overseas, so they dodo don't know what it means" (Bhabha 1994: 6).

English, or, more widely, British history "happened overseas" – a statement which calls attention to the need for its continuous genealogical reassessment by taking into consideration what Michel Foucault defined as the "plural aspect of knowledge" (Foucault 2004: 4), which sets official narrations of history against the so-called "subjugated knowledges" of minority groups, subaltern subjects or all those who have remained voiceless, and whose stories have been marginalized and forgotten. The rescue of such voices implies a form of opposition against the hierarchizing practices and monopolisation of knowledge production, a "battle [which] involves resisting the 'omissions' and distortions of official histories, returning to lost voices and forgotten experiences, relating to the past from the perspective of the present in an alternative (out-of-the-mainstream) way" (Medina 2011: 13). Interestingly, Medina suggests important links between the present and the past, and therefore of memory, for a full understanding of how power relations and hegemonic practices have conditioned, often obstructed, the construction of historical knowledge and truth.

The present essay somehow participates in the aforesaid BARS's plea to "amplify Black voices", as well as in Medina's call for "returning to lost voices", by reconsidering and re-assessing a multivocal and complex text such as *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave Related by Herself*, one of the many testimonies left by former slaves during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which were published as separate books or

pamphlets[1]. In her radio play *The Lamplighter* (2008), written in commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade, Nigerian-Scottish writer Jackie Kay has four former female slaves tell their experiences of deracination, sexual abuse and physical exploitation in the Caribbean plantations before emancipation – their voices are individual but also form a chorus of shared suffering. "The forgetting is maybe not what's important; it's more interesting what you still remember. How blazingly alive the past is" (Kay 2010: 87), writes Kay in her autobiography *Red Dust Road*, and suggests it is everyone's responsibility to retrieve it and "try and fill in the missing pieces" (Kay 2010: 141). Like Gilroy and Bhabha, she urges her readers to reflect on the fact that "the history of the slave trade is not 'black history' to be shoved into a ghetto and forgotten" but "the history of the world. It concerns each and every one of us" (Kay 2007). Hence her decision to make four exemplary 'subaltern' figures speak with their own voices, so as to rescue them from the oblivion to which numberless similar voices have been confined throughout history. Behind each of these fictional women slaves lies the factual 'herstory' of Mary Prince. One of the underlying messages of literary works such as Kay's epic play is that, in order to face the problem of today's racism and forms of discrimination based on ethnic difference, one must look back at eighteenth- and nineteenth-century history as well as at the counter-histories narrated by those who, to adapt Foucault's words, "came out of the shadows, […] had no glory and […] no rights", and who began "to speak and to tell of [their] history" (Foucault 2004: 70) – albeit in very complex and, at times, controversial ways, as this essay will try to showcase.

The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave Related by Herself (henceforth referred to as *The History*) is the first slave narrative published by a woman, in this case an Afro-descendant woman (1788-1833) who lived most of her life as a slave in the British West Indies – in particular, Bermuda, where she was born, Turk Island and Antigua. Prince's memoir was dictated orally to the English poetess and abolitionist Miss Susanna Moodie (*née* Strickland), affiliated with the Anti-Slavery Society in London, for which, apart from *The History*, she transcribed the slave narrative *Negro Slavery Described by a Negro. Being the Narrative of Ashton Warner*. Both texts came out in the same year, 1831, when the slave trade had already been outlawed both in the British Empire and in the United States, although slavery was still considered a legal practice in the colonies. Strickland compiled Prince's narrative when both women were living in London with Thomas Pringle, the Scottish poet who in 1827 had become the secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society. Strickland was his guest during 1829 or 1830; while Prince, after abandoning her owners, Mr. and Mrs. John Wood, moved to Pringle's household and worked for him as a domestic servant possibly until her death and the promulgation of the Slavery Abolition Act, although the information about

[1] Well-known examples are, *inter alia*: *Narrative of the Enslavement of Ottobah Cugoano, a Native of Africa; Published by Himself in the Year 1787*; *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa* (1789); *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845); *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave* (1850); Solomon Northup's, *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853); and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). A goundbreaking study on the genre of slave narrative is *The Slave's Narrative* (1991) edited by Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates Jr.

the last years of her life is rather scanty. What we know is that she would have liked to return to Antigua as a free woman and join her husband, the free black widower Daniel James she had married secretly in 1826, but, despite Pringle's political connections both in Britain and the Caribbean, the Woods refused to manumit her. The appearance of *The History* in 1831 was an attempt to stir public opinion about Mary's case, but not that only, since it clearly became an abolitionist tract in the hands of the Anti-Slavery Society.

As a memoir or "recollective act" (Olney 1984: 47), Prince's narrative retraces her life story from childhood to the present: that is to say, from when, at the age of one, she was bought, along with her mother, by Captain George Darrell to the moment in which she decided to collaborate with Strickland and Pringle, explicitly declaring her intention to unbury and pass on her personal history in order for it to serve as exemplum of the savagery and inhumanity – "the horrors of slavery!" (Prince 1997: 74) – which all slaves had to endure. "First and foremost", Fisch writes, "the slave narrative is a text with a purpose: the end of slavery. The slave narrative is a key artifact in the global campaign to end first the slave trade […], then colonial slavery" (Fisch 2007: 2). The dialectic of private and public dimensions, as will be later detailed in this essay, is a pervasive constitutive component of the narrative, which helps us understand why Prince often insists on specific details concerning her changeful but worsening experience in the service of several owners (Captain John Ingham in Bermuda, Robert Darrell on Grand Turk Island and Bermuda, and, finally, John Wood in Antigua).

In the first section of this essay, building on the work carried out by other scholars (mainly Allen 2012, Banner 2013, Baumgartner 2001, Olney 1984 and Todorova 2001), I will discuss the private-public dynamics characterizing *The History* by focusing on the issues of textual authenticity and authorship. These will be tackled in relation to the generic hybridity of a work which can be read as an example of 'minor literature', in the sense intended by Deleuze and Guattari in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1975), and, at the same time, as a counter-historical document based on the assumption that all autobiographical work, though using "fictive techniques, […] is not false: it is fictive, not faithless" (Niemtzow 1982: 107). Section two of the essay will resume the discourse of authorship in order to show how Prince's voice – that of a female slave subject to both racial and patriarchal oppression – emerges out of a complex interplay of reticent attitudes and a bodily language expressing resistance. The structural dialectic of textual inscription and embodiment characterizing the narrator's voice can be examined through Gayatri Spivak's concept of the (in)visibility of the female subaltern subject. Mary Prince's silence on sexual abuse is interestingly meshed with her patent utterance of pain and disability derived from her being subject to constant physical violence. In the third and final section of the essay, adapting this time Deleuze and Guattari's anti-Freudian paradigm of individual desire, I will suggest how the aforesaid apparently contradictory mix of linguistic restraint and articulation can be explained by the existence in the text of a private-cum-public voice which makes Prince's agency dependent on the political significance of *The History* as an abolitionist pamphlet meant to reach a specific aim and audience.

2. Counter-history and Minor Literature: Mary Prince's Complex Authorship and Agency

Being an autobiographical text, *The History*, like all slave narratives and, more generally, any autobiographical work, crosses the border between fiction and real or historical accounts[2]. William Andrews' warning is significant in this sense:

> [T]he proven reliability of these narratives as sourcebooks of facts about slavery should not cause us to forget that as historical narratives they are subject to the same 'poetic processes' of composition as any other works of that kind. Even the most objective and unrhetorical slave narrative is still a 'fiction of factual representation'" (Andrews 1986: 16).

"Fiction of factual representation" is a quotation from Hayden White's *Tropics of Discourse* (1978), and it refers to the discursive nature of a slave narrative, whose presumably authentic diegetic account must be always linked to the extradiegetic context of production, its hypothetical reader and the principal aim it intends to reach. This is one of the reasons why Banner has defined slave narratives as a "dynamic literary genre", able to "highlight actual social injustices experienced by the authors" yet also marked by "literary capacities for play and complex signification" (Banner 2013: 301). As will be shown, *The History* is a stratified text in which the principal speaking voice must be assessed in relation to the role she is expected to perform. So, to borrow from Banner again, reading the text should not so much aim at "[apprehending] the truth of a former slave's existence by […] probing underneath its surface for the 'real' slave's voice" (301) as at understanding how that voice, without entirely denying its authenticity, plays with other actors moving in the narrative background but affecting its foreground – *in primis*, the editor Thomas Pringle, but also the amanuensis Susanna Strickland.

In other words, *The History* is a multivocal text and the 'I' speaking in it poses crucial questions of identity and self-definition for a number of reasons. First of all, one cannot overlook the fact that a slave was denied status as an autonomous subject and was treated as a reified object with an existence inextricably tied to that of his/her master. Thus, how is one supposed to read a text whose author, and autodiegetic narrator, was not recognized a social and legal identity in the world? (see Thomas 2000: 177). Throughout the narrative, Prince often highlights her being considered as a non-subject, for instance during the auction, before being sold to Captain I–:

> I was soon surrounded by strange men, who examined and handled me in the same manner that a butcher would a calf or a lamb he was about to purchase, and who talked about my shape and size in like words – as if I could no more understand their meaning than the dumb beasts. I was then put up for sale (Prince 1997: 62).

How did contemporary readers react to this speaking 'I'? Would they recognize the authorship of a subaltern with no right to speak, deemed unworthy of epistemic respect and as invisible to civil society as the black boy in Archibald McLauchlin's portrait of the

[2] On the historicity of slave narratives see John W. Blassingame's *The Slave Community* (1972) and Eugene

Glassford family?[3] As will be later clarified, Prince's first-person narrative was published together with various paratextual materials meant to corroborate the reliability of her account, as if the slave's speaking 'I' alone were insufficient to produce the expected effects. In Banner's words, the "prefaces, introductions, and codas – that 'framed' a slave narrative most often functioned as an authoritative white verification of a black author's intellectual abilities and good moral character" (Banner 2013: 298).

Secondly, the identity and authenticity of the first-person narrator is complicated by the fact that *The History*, like other ex-slaves' life stories, is a ghostwritten narrative dictated by Mary Prince to Susanna Strickland and, even more importantly, edited by Thomas Pringle. "Even if an editor faithfully reproduces the facts of a black narrator's life", in Andrews' words, "it was still the editor who decided what to make of these facts, how they should be emphasized, in what order they ought to be presented, and what was extraneous, or germane" (Andrews 1986: 20). Pringle is such an editor, although in the Preface he states that "the idea of writing Mary Prince's story was first suggested by herself", "the narrative was taken down from Mary's own lips", and therefore, "no fact of importance has been omitted, and not a single circumstance or sentiment has been added" (Prince 1997: 55). The truth is that he knew how to turn "'a statement of facts'" into "a 'fiction of factual representation', that is, a readable, convincing, and moving autobiography" (Andrews 1986: 20) which would appeal to an audience sensitive to the contemporary debates pro- and anti-slavery. Pringle's deliberate insistence on Prince's agency is one of the strategies he deploys to respond to the generic requirements of slave narratives serving as literary vehicles of abolitionist propaganda and ideology. After all, his own words are revealing as regards the impact and scope of his interventions:

> [the narrative] was written out fully, with all the narrator's repetitions and prolixities, and afterwards *pruned* into its present shape; retaining *as far as was practicable*, Mary's exact expressions and peculiar phraseology. […] it is essentially her own, without any material alteration farther than was requisite to exclude redundancies and gross grammatical errors, *so as to render it clearly intelligible* (Prince 1997: 55; my italics).

The History must be rendered intelligible for the specific white English audience Pringle has in mind: namely, potential supporters (financially, too) of the Anti-Slavery Society he presided over, and people who, after reading about Mary's first-hand experience of human atrocity, would be convinced of the impelling need to end the horrors of slavery. Given the justice of the cause and Prince's own personal interest in it, there is no reason to suspect that she objected to his manipulative editing or to his decision to add to the main text further

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Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1974). For a treatment of the complexity of the autobiographical genre, see: P. Lejeune, *On Autobiography* (1989); J. Olney, *Metaphors of the Self* (1981) and S. Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography* (1987), and Joanne M. Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition within a Tradition* (1989).

[3] McLauchlin painted it in 1767. It is exhibited in the Glasgow People's Palace. A black servant was originally portrayed on the left behind his master, but in 1778, when it became illegal to own slaves in Scotland, he was painted over.

documents both meant to attest to its veracity (i.e. informative footnotes and appendices, such as paper excerpts and documents from the court cases involving Prince) and to arouse the readership's interest (i.e. a similar text: *Narrative of Louis Asa-Asa, A Captured African*). On the other hand, in 1831 the Scottish pro-slavery statistician James Queen attacked *The History* in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* and accused Pringle of inventing a story for purely ideological reasons and personal interests. As has been noted, even the term "History" instead of "story" in the title may "[indicate] writing that has been verified and sanctioned by the Western apparatus for the production of knowledge" (Todorova 2001: 289) – a knowledge which undeniably served anti-slavery propaganda, while also satisfying the slave's own need to make his or her voice heard and accelerate the process of self- as well as collective emancipation. Prince's authorship, as it were, complicitly depends on Pringle's editorial control and choices.

Thirdly and finally, the identity of the speaking 'I' cannot be regarded as perfectly coinciding with the extra-literary Mary Prince, because it is an 'I' most often to be read as a 'we'. In the third section of the essay, I will elaborate on the symbolic, or synecdochic, value of the first person by focusing on the theme of desire and resistance. What I am concerned with in this context is to interpret this particular use of 'I' with the possibility to read *The History* as an example of counter-history and 'minor literature' – the latter in the sense intended by Deleuze and Guattari in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1975), a concept more recently re-elaborated by French scholar Pascale Casanova in her study *La République mondiale des Lettres* (1999), in which she takes issue with Deleuze and Guattari's "littérature mineure" and replaces it with "petite littérature". Despite Pascale's critique of what, in her view, is her predecessors' limited assessment of Kafka's political thinking, both phrases similarly refer to something which "a minority constructs within a major language" (Deleuze & Guattari 1986: 16), not a marginal literature but one written in a language that does not belong to the speaking I and produced by a minority appropriating the language of a majority in order to subvert its assumptions and monopolising vision. So, on the one hand, *The History* is a counter-historical narrative presenting the history of slavery from the point of view of one of its victims and using her individual story figuratively. On the other, it is a 'minor' literary artifact exploiting the possibilities offered by a 'major' language – not least widespread circulation – yet appropriating it in Calibanesque fashion, as it were, to write back to and, albeit implicitly, 'curse' the system which legitimized slavery.

Interestingly enough, some critics have identified typically Creole or Caribbean features in Prince's language, that 'peculiar phraseology' Pringle mentions in the Preface. For instance, Pouchet Paquet observes that "[w]hatever the degree of authorial control Mary Prince exercised over the published narrative, her voice is a privileged one in the text as a whole, and it speaks out of a distinct West Indian particularity" (1992: 136). Allen regrets that Pringle's pruning "disrupts Prince's Creole voice by removing repetition from her narrative" (2012: 512) – what the editor considers "redundances" [*sic*] (Prince 1997: 55) are in fact, as Allen explains, a typical characteristic of the Antiguan Creole that Prince would speak. However, some of those repetitions are preserved in the text and, as I will clarify in section two of the essay, they are relevant to Prince's deployment of a language apt to represent extreme bodily experiences. As an example of both counter-history and minor

literature, *The History* presents an agentic narrator whose identity is collective rather than individual. I therefore agree with William Andrews, when he points out that "the most reliable slave narrative would be one that seemed purely mimetic, in which the self is on the periphery instead of at the center of attention, looking outside not within, transcribing rather than interpreting a set of objective facts" (Andrews 1986: 6).

Both Prince and Pringle certainly "look outside" the text, and collaboratively construct an authorial subject who must reach out to the contemporary readership, so that the publication of *The History* might be functional to their common objective of increasing public awareness about the ignominy of the slavery system – in Prince's case, also to her need to raise money to buy her manumission from the Woods. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the narrator "participates in earlier, eighteenth-century discourses about virtue in which virtue was associated with male sentiment or 'feeling'. […]. This emphasis on feeling forms the basis of Prince's appeal to her readers' sympathy" (Santamarina 2007: 233). In fact, the rhetoric of sentiment as well as the legacy of Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) provided the ethical and moral foundations on which abolitionists built their campaign (cfr. Carey 2005). "Reaching the 'hearts of men'", writes Andrews, "was the rhetorical aim of practically all black autobiography in the first century of its existence" (Andrews 1986: 5), and, as has been previously observed, black autobiographers and anti-slavery champions shook hands as far as this aim was concerned. Such a commonality of purpose is confirmed by Prince's (or by now we should say her narrator's) reiterated use throughout the narrative of the image of the 'heart', a main trope of sentimental rhetoric, in order to confute the prejudice that slaves were unable to feel, while at the same time underscoring English colonizers' lack of sympathy and compassion. Here are some significant examples, the first two of which refer to the moment in which Prince was sold at an auction and snatched from her family, while the last one is a portrait of one of her five cruel owners:

> Oh dear! I cannot bear to think of that day, – it is too much. – It recalls the great grief that filled my heart, and the woeful thoughts that passed to and fro through my mind, whilst listening to the pitiful words of my poor mother, weeping for the loss of her children. I wish I could find words to tell you all I then felt and suffered. The great God above alone knows the thought of the poor slave's heart, and the bitter pains which follow such separations as these (Prince 1997: 61).

> Did one of the many bystanders, who were looking at us so carelessly, think of the pain that wrung the hearts of the negro woman and her young ones? No, no! […] many of them were not slow to make their remarks upon us aloud, though their light words fell like cayenne on the fresh wounds of our hearts (Prince 1997: 62).

> Nothing could touch his hard heart – neither sighs, nor tears, nor prayers, nor streaming blood; he was deaf to our cries, and careless of our sufferings (72).

From a literary perspective, the rhetoric of sensibility pervading the whole narrative allows *The History* to be analyzed *vis-à-vis* representative works of Romantic-period

sentimental literature, many of which were significantly written by women abolitionists, such as, among others, Hannah More, Helen Maria Williams, Amelia Opie, Anna Laetitia Barbauld and Maria Edgeworth. However, one crucial distinction needs to be made.

Moira Ferguson has extensively studied the anti-slavery writing produced by white British women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Ferguson 2014), showing how they gendered abolitionist discourse in order to encourage a re-evaluation of typically feminine (and proto-feminist) concerns – such as family relations, domesticity, love, separation and sexual abuse, all of them key-themes in Prince's narrative, too. By intersecting or juxtaposing racial, gender and class issues, on the one hand, they used abolitionist activism to advance white British women's socio-political self-emancipation. On the other, though, they risked obscuring or misrepresenting the peculiar condition of black women slaves, depicting them as if they formed an "undifferentiated mass" (Ferguson 2014: 4), and overlooking how both race and class determine unbridgeable differences among women. "These writers", Ferguson argues, "displaced anxieties about their own assumed powerlessness and inferiority onto the representations of slaves" (Ferguson 2014: 3), retaining a line of continuity with Mary Astell's and Mary Wollstonecraft's ideas about women's social and legal status respectively in *Some Reflections Upon Marriage* (1700) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). They spoke *about* and *for* the Other in order to speak about themselves. On the contrary, however complex or controlled Prince's authority and agency are in *The History*, the narrating "I" is that of a female West-Indian slave speaking both *about* herself and *for* others sharing her traumas. Hence, *The History* presents a different kind of representation, that is, one based not on displacement or the projection of a Self onto an Other, but on the exemplary, synecdochic role of a subaltern who "can speak", albeit through the language of her victimizers.

3. How Can Mary Prince Speak? The (In)visible Subaltern

Contrary to the subaltern subjects in white women's writing about slavery, Prince speaks in *The History*, even if through a *dramatis persona* that appropriates the language of empire in order to tell the truth about slavery

> Oh the horrors of slavery! […] what my eyes have seen I think it is my duty to relate; for few people in England know what slavery is. I have been a slave – I have felt what a slave feels, and I know what a slave knows; and I would have all the good people in England to know it too, that they may break our chains, and set us free (Prince 1997: 74).

However audible, Prince's voice can still be relevantly examined taking into account Gayatri Spivak's concept of the invisibility of the female subaltern subject. Indeed, in the narrative, Prince, as author and narrator, is simultaneously visible and invisible. Not being able to speak her Creole language, her cultural identity remains shadowy; but her idiosyncratic English, partly emulating the rhythms of her native tongue, cannot be seen merely as an abolitionist stratagem to mimic authenticity. In other words, the real person Mary Prince transpires through the mediating language of both amanuensis and editor, notwithstanding their intrusive cooperation.

As is well known, in her challenging essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), Spivak suggests that when intellectuals and academics give visibility to a subaltern, they do not necessarily allow them to speak with their own voice, nor do they directly recognize them as knowledge-producing subjects. On the contrary, speaking *for* the subalterns, they manipulate their independent agency and construct their consciousness according to Western, mostly essentialist and patriarchal, ideologies of cultural hegemony. Therefore, it is more urgent to acknowledge why and how social groups excluded from socio-economic and political power have always been invisible in official historical accounts than to attempt to fill in that gap by speaking about and for them. Spivak argues that the forced silence of the subaltern prevents Westerners from listening to them, so how can they possibly be represented and heard? By the same token, the critic Rachel Banner has taken issue with those scholars who compulsively tend to identify "the 'hidden voices' of [slave] narratives as recognizably real manifestations of the 'true' speakers behind white abolitionist machinations" (Banner 2013: 300). More relevantly, as regards the unveiling of identity behind the speaking 'I' of *The History*, she comments:

> There is or was a referent, so to speak. Yet, I contend that it should no longer be imperative to locate that referent in continuing studies of slave narrative. Instead, to fulfill an ethical scholarly imperative of respect for the historical voices of abused, enslaved, and oppressed people of color, critics should acknowledge that the "truth" of the people who spoke in these voices is, in some sense, forever lost (309-310).

In fact, the truth of many facts and people Prince refers to is not completely lost, since they can be verified by inspecting contemporary documents such as *Slave Registers*, letters and legal acts (cfr. Maddison-MacFadyen 2013). Nevertheless, the authentication of the *whole* truth of Prince's account is as hard a process as the full identification of the speaking "I" with the non-fictional former slave. *The History*, as has been previously illustrated, is not the work of a single writer but a multi-authored text whose narrator is the result of a series of discursive negotiations between Prince, Pringle and Strickland.

One of such negotiations concerns the way in which Prince's voice alternates between silence and utterance: on the one hand, a reticence mostly dictated by the generic conventions of abolitionist texts; on the other, an explicitness that reflects both staple *topoi* of slave narratives and Prince's own purpose to act as spokesperson of all the victims of slavery. On one particular topic, for instance, she must be silent and leave it inscribed or latent in the text. Andrews notices that sometimes the gaps or encrypted allusions we find in slave narratives may reveal "a deliberate effort by the narrator to grapple with aspects of his or her personality that have been repressed out of deference to or fear of the dominant culture" (Andrews 1986: 8). Although there is incontrovertible evidence that female slaves were victims of sexual abuse on the part of their masters, Prince never explicitly refers to this traumatic experience, since the 'dominant culture', which in her case is represented by the Anti-Slavery Society and its press organs, prohibited the treatment of themes which might put in jeopardy the support of white Christian readers – black women's sexuality was one of them. As Ferguson remarks, the Antislavery Society sponsoring *The History*

> won public support by detailing atrocities and portraying female slaves as pure, Christlike victims and martyrs in one of their major organs of propaganda, the *Anti-Slavery Reporter*. Women whose cause they sponsored could not be seen to be involved in any situation […] that smacked of sin and moral corruption. Christian purity, for those abolitionists, overrode regard for truth (Prince 1997: 4).

Prince *cannot* speak about sexuality, not even about the sexual violence she certainly suffered, because the pro-slavery advocates would use it against her and turn it into a proof of the woman's moral promiscuousness and depravity. Ironically, therefore, the theme of black female slaves' sexual behaviour was central to both pro- and anti-slavery public debates. It became a hotly contested issue shortly after the publication of *The History*, and especially in one of the two court cases following it in 1833, in which Prince's former owner, John Wood, brought an act for libel against Thomas Pringle. Prince was called to witness and details emerged of her life which she did not report in the narrative. In fact, only once does she imply that she was sexually abused, when she gives us the following portrayal of her owner Mr. D–:

> He had an ugly fashion of stripping himself quite naked and ordering me then to wash him in a tub of water. 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. […] he was a very indecent man – very spiteful, and too indecent; with no shame for his servants, no shame for his own flesh (Prince 1997: 77-78).

The truth is, "Prince's testimony in court […] confirms that the evangelical editors had censored several accounts of sexual activity from her narrative" (Prince 1997: 28). The year in which the Emancipation Bill passed through the House of Lords, Prince could publicly speak with her own voice and reveal the truth about the sexual harassments and physical violence she endured.

Prince's forced reticence about sexuality contrasts with the verbal explication of the hard work she did and of the corporeal pain inflicted upon her by her barbarous masters. One of the documents appended to the third edition of *The History* is a letter written by Pringle's wife to Mrs Townsend, one of the Secretaries of the "Birmingham Ladies' Society for the Relief of the Negro Slaves". Mrs. Pringle provides a shocking description of Prince's body, which becomes another text graphically reproducing the effects of floggings and torture reported in the narrative:

> [The] whole of the back part of her body is distinctly scarred, and, as it were, *chequered*, with the vestiges of severe floggings. Besides this, there are many large scars on other parts of her person, exhibiting an appearance as if the flesh had been deeply cut, or lacerated with gashes, by some instrument wielded by most unmerciful hands (Prince 1997: 130).

The author adds that she has observed "similar cases at the Cape of Good Hope" (131), where she lived with her husband from 1820 to 1826. This statement is further evidence of the fact that *The History* and its attached documents became vehicles of anti-slavery propaganda. The private and public discourses are interlaced throughout it. In fact, "the genesis of Prince's narrative can be seen as an extension of her bodily pain and a rewriting of the slaveholder's script of tyranny and ill-usage" (Baumgartner 2001: 266). Undeniably, even the violence written and exposed on Mary's violated body as well as her *embodied* language should be considered in light of the political significance and aim of the slave narrative. These, however, do not invalidate the truthfulness of Prince's psycho-physical pain, which is textually reflected in the use of repetitions meant to "construct a specific narrative" (Banner 2013: 305) concerning the fatiguing daily routine ("work, work, work"; "I was sick, sick of Turk's Island"; "I was very sick, very sick indeed", 73-74, 75, 88), the traumas caused by the separation from her mother ("it is sad, sad", "oh my mother, my mother", "weep, weep, weep", 61, 64, 68), physical distress, endurance, and the struggle to survive ("oh the trials, the trials!", "lick-lick", "clatter, clatter, clatter", 64, 66, 69). Anaphora becomes for Prince a linguistic mode to express resistance as well as "an indirect critique of her owners and the system of slavery" (Baumgartner 2001: 260). The fact that this critique reflects not only her point of view but also the intentions of the Anti-slavery society subsidizing *The History* does not diminish the power of her voice. Nor does it reduce Prince into a passive tool of abolitionist propaganda. On the contrary, she is made visible and audible by a narrator who expresses collective resistance and desire for freedom.

4. Desire, Agency, and Collective Identity

Freud was notoriously against any women's emancipation movement and believed that women's lives were ruled by their sexual reproductive functions. If, on the one hand, he acknowledged their sexual desire or libido, on the other, he associated it with passivity and penis envy – therefore, a lack. Any form of desire or vital energy in a woman is, according to him, to be related to her biological nature and passive sexual drive. In fact, generally speaking, in both Freud's and Lacan's psychoanalysis desire arises from lack, a concept that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari confute in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972). Here desire is represented as a collective, productive force and active agent which does not exclusively depend on one's past and childhood experiences but changes throughout an individual's life owing to factors lying outside the boundaries of the family. Instead of leading desire back to the confined world of child-parent relationships and sexual discourse, Deleuze and Guattari regard it as the source of a broader mechanism involving social, political and economic dynamics. As it derives from lack, in Freud desire belongs to the realm of the subconscious and imagination, whereas in the Deleuze and Guattari's vision, it interacts with the material world, is real and even produces reality. Consequently, desire is not something isolated in an individual's experience but may influence an entire body politic.

In her narrative, Mary Prince expresses an affirmative desire for freedom that reflects Deleuze and Guattari's politics of desire. Rather than being self-directed attempts to change her individual situation and achieve personal emancipation, all her acts and words of resistance must be read, in Ferguson's words, as "a microcosm of black opposition, an

individual expression of the collective consciousness that sought an end to illegitimate domination" (Prince 1997: 19). Although she knows that in England she could live as a free woman, while in Antigua she would still be treated as a slave, Prince is tormented by a dilemma: "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!" (95). It is indeed to condemn the horrors of slavery everywhere and claim for general emancipation rather than personal legal freedom that Prince confronts her masters with various forms of resistance. These include: the *petit marronage* whereby she temporarily runs away from Captain I– to return to her mother; her defense of Mr. D's daughter against his violence; various requests to move from one owner to another; her secret marriage to a former slave; and her involvement in the Moravian church in Antigua. All these acts are charged politically and allow her to acquire progressive self-awareness, until she finds the courage to express her suffering: "I then took courage and said that I could stand the flogging no longer" (Prince 1997: 70). Her bodily pain, therefore, becomes an allegory of the traumatization and agony experienced by all black slaves. The torture that her mistress Mrs I– inflicts on two young slaves is also her own: "my pity for these poor boys was soon transferred to myself; for I was licked and flogged, and pinched by her pitiless fingers in the neck and arms, exactly as they were" (66). The narrative provides innumerable examples of Mary's shifting "from the private self-consciousness of a child to the politicized, public self-consciousness of an enslaved woman speaking on behalf of all slaves" (Pouchet Paquet 1992: 138). Hence, she encapsulates in her own account other slave narratives of the so-called 'Black Diaspora' (Gilroy 1993), speaking about dislocation, dispersal, and human ignominy – such as the stories of the 'mulatto' Cyrus, of Jack from Guinea, of the pregnant house-slave Hetty, and of old Daniel. "In telling my own sorrows", Prince avows, here as elsewhere emulating sentimental rhetoric, "I cannot pass by those of my fellow-slaves – for when I think of my own griefs I remember theirs" (Prince 1997: 75).

Because of the collective nature of a desire projected into future change and emancipation, the 'I' of the narrative gradually shades into a 'we' representative of an imagined community of Afro-descendant women and men who address the white audience to call for a more equal society and universal freedom:

> All slaves want to be free – to be free is very sweet. […] I have been a slave myself – I know what slaves feel – I can tell by myself what other slaves feel […]. They hire servants in England; and if they don't like them, they send them away: they can't lick them. […] They have their liberty. That's just what *we* want. We don't mind hard work, if we had proper treatment, and proper wages like English servants. […] But they won't give it, they will have work – work – work, night and day, sick or well, till we are quite done up; and we must not speak up nor look amiss, however much we be abused. And then when we are quite done up, who cares for us, more than for a lame horse? This is slavery. I tell it to let English people know the truth; and I hope they will never leave off to pray God, and call loud to the great King of England, till all the poor blacks be given free, and slavery done up for evermore (Prince 1997: 94).

This appeal to the English with the purpose of engaging their sympathies is another example of the multivocal narration characterizing *The History*, both reflecting the requirements of a genre appropriated by the contemporary abolitionist agenda and providing an early example of Edouard Glissant's idea of 'Relation' – what binds together people who experience something 'exceptional' yet 'shared', such as the Middle Passage and slavery:

> Peoples who have been to the abyss […] live Relation and clear the way for it, to the extent that the oblivion of the abyss comes to them and that, consequently, their memory intensifies. For though this experience made you, original victim floating toward the sea's abysses, an exception, it became something shared and made us, the descendants, one people among others. Peoples do not live on exception. Relation is not made up of things that are foreign but of shared knowledge (Glissant 1997: 8).

However, either as a treatise backed by mainstream anti-slavery politics or as a "collective utterance" within a "minor literature" (Deleuze & Guattari 1986: 65), *The History*, to adapt Andrews' words, has a deliberate "didactic intent" achieved through "its treatment of life as representative or allegorical, its unifying sense of calling and vocation, and its stylistic sensitivity to the arts of persuasion" (Andrews 1986: 17). In other words, it is marked by a strong performative and illocutionary force: the 'speaker' wants to do something specific in saying what she says – as *dramatis persona* of a slave, as the mouthpiece of a community, and as the public voice of the abolitionist campaign.

In conclusion, *The History* involves the narrator in a very complex task. She retrieves from memory and relates a story of personal misery, struggle and resilience which ends with the reconstruction of her Self. In other words, "the devastating force of pain that she first experiences becomes her most important means for the creation of a new order of experience, a new subject position from which to speak" (Morabito 2019: 144). Thus, as has been observed, despite "the cruelty, callousness and injustice meted out to her by her slave-owners, she is victorious in the end" (Maddison-MacFadyen 2013: 660). At the same time, she is patently aware of the political symbolism of her account, of its cultural and historical importance as a document participating in emancipationist and anticolonial movements as well as in a collective struggle for racial, gender and social equality. Because Mary Prince's memoir was conceived and had to act as a persuasive, direct attack on the system of slavery, the narrator's voice inconsistently wavers between reticence and utterance, strategic repression and graphic description, in order to acquiesce to the moralistic views and horizon of expectations of her British readership.

However, there is also a third discursive level in which the speaking 'I' and especially the 'we' emerging at the end of the narrative are involved – beyond both the personal and historical dimensions. That voice manages to transcend chronotopic coordinates and bears testimony to how the human being, even when powerless, silenced and ignobly humiliated, can show active desire as well as build resilience in the face of psycho-physical traumas and use both as tools of resistance, survival and eventually freedom. Thus, listening to that voice, as well as to its silences, means resurrecting a 'subjugated knowledge', to return to Foucault's

critical genealogy, which enables a deeper and broader understanding of humankind's past and present history.

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