# Double Down: Exploring Power & Gothic Conventions in *The History of Mary Prince*

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*The History of Mary Prince*, first published in 1831 as a piece of Abolitionist literature, is steeped in the Gothic mode as it relates to experiences of psychological and corporeal violence. Unlike the early English and American writers of the Gothic genre who strove to work against Enlightenment principles of reason and rigidity, Prince's *History* is not designed for imaginative stimulation or emotional entertainment. Instead, Prince implores the British to realize that the Gothic imaginary—an aesthetic discourse invested in the dark side of humanity—has as its source the systematic kidnapping, torture, and murder of Black enslaved peoples. Without the typical British Gothic settings of castles, laboratories, and subterraneous passages at her disposal, Prince draws upon the Atlantic Ocean, salt plantations, the Black body and voice as her Gothic sources. Prince's unconscious transplanting of concepts such as sublime nature, the double, and spectrality into her text demonstrates an (en)forced embodiment of the Gothic imaginary on Black enslaved peoples. In so doing, Prince deconstructs the division between horror and terror, implying that the Gothic's need and desire to *imagine* physical and ideological violence is a privilege and a luxury.

Some might argue that Prince's slave narrative is not 'traditional' Gothic because it does not constitute the genre's conventions—ghosts, graveyards, underground labyrinths—in explicit terms. However, this is to disregard the Gothic's cliches as immutable, incapable of being meaningful tools for authors other than it's (white, male) 'fathers'; this is to incarcerate the "highly unstable genre" (Hogle 1) into the prison of Enlightenment rigidity it attempts to escape. The text's title itself is rooted in Gothic traditions: being a "History" (Prince 1) "With A Supplement From the Editor" (1) is reminiscent of Gothic prefaces insisting upon contained texts as "ancient" histories or 'found documents.' Furthermore, Toni Morrison argues in "Romancing the Shadow," that the "slave population, it could be assumed, offered itself up as surrogate selves for meditation on problems of human freedom, its lure and elusiveness" (37). The inclusion of the subtitle "A West Indian Slave" (Prince 1) in the text's full title exemplifies Morrison's point; the text is inextricably linked to the metaphors of imprisonment and emancipation that electrify white author's texts as a useful descriptor for the tensions between intellect and emotion, the Enlightenment and the Gothic. However, Prince's text—as an *actual* historical account—offers a counterpoint to the Gothic "business" which "is not instruction, but the pleasures of the imagination" (Clery 23). Prince offers her remembering as reality. This is not

simply a creative venture; this is the affirmation and textual evidencing of Black human life persisting through and beyond slavery. While the Gothic seeks to confront cultural anxieties safely, at distance, Prince's lived experience is not projected or imagined but inscribed on her body and psyche. Given her being disappeared from the historical record after this publication, her cultural confrontation is risky, her life illegible to the colonial historical eye once it moves beyond a narrative of slavery into freedom. Nonetheless, Prince inscribes several variations of the Gothic double into her text which ultimately reclaims and consolidates the geographically and culturally ruptured voice of Black people into an authoritative force that is simultaneously audible to the Western ear and authentic to herself.

Doubling occurs as a double narration between white editors and a formerly enslaved Black person and Prince's double-speak as a voice that is audible to both Britons and the Black diaspora. Starting with double narration, although Thomas Pringle assists Prince's publicity by virtue of his whiteness, he actively moderates her speech. Pringle states that the narrative "was written out fully, with all the narrator's repetitions and prolixities, and afterwards pruned into shape; retaining as far as was practicable, Mary's exact expressions and peculiar phraseology" (Prince 3). Pringle's preface attaches a tediousness, an Otherness or 'peculiarity' to Prince's original, unedited narrative; underneath his Abolitionist activism still lies an air of condescension. In true Gothic style, this repressed tendency rears its head in his contributions to the narrative. He enacts a form of doubling by "mental processes leaping from one person to the other [...] so that the one possesses knowledge, feeling, and experience in common with the other" (Freud 234). In this case, Pringle transfers the verbal processes of the British to Prince by 'pruning' her authentic voice to make it as palatable and *familiar* to the British ear as possible. The Gothic double reifies the concept of the 'divided' self, often representing the internal conflicts of human desire, however what Prince's text makes clear is that this division is enforced onto the Black body. Sadiya Hartman's chapter in *Scenes of Subjection* echoes this issue in that the "romantic racialism of abolitionists [...] constituted the African as childish, primitive, contented, and endowed with *great mimetic capacities*" (Hartman 23, emphasis added). Pringle infantilizes Prince from the outset, excusing her natural cadence as *tedious* babble. So even though it "is essentially her own" (Prince 3), Prince's voice has been filtered through the colonial English sieve, rendered into 'mimed' English that is "clearly intelligible" (3) to the white public. In this sense, Pringle caters to the Gothic "demand for artificial excitements" (Clery 29) by revising her work, making up her cadence. Essentially, he is the ghost narrator—a respectable double that haunts Prince's text, an interchangeable voice that doubles as her own.

Secondly, while her white editors ensure some level of cultural assimilation and respectability, Prince's narrative proper features affirmative phrases that highlight her voice as a double—a divided and interchangeable self that represents both an individual and collective Black voice. Think of this as Prince's 'doublespeak,' which combined with the Gothic concern of the return of repressed histories, forms a

language both haunted by Prince's stolen past and capable of extracting colonial anxieties. In his discussion of the double in the essay "The Uncanny," Sigmund Freud includes "constant recurrence" (234) with the example of "the same names through several consecutive generations" (234). Prince accomplishes this by punctuating her text with authoritative "I" statements that reclaim her sense of self, despite her slave name. Early on she states, "I have been a slave—I have felt what a slave feels, and I know what a slave knows" (Prince 21) which links to her concluding remarks that "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). Having been robbed of her given name, Prince's repeated "I" statements serve as a self-chosen name; a biographical statement that she exists as a self-sanctified individual agent, no matter the name her oppressors give her. She extends this to all Black enslaved peoples, insisting upon her own and other's testimony as a reliable collective voice. Prince thus enacts Freud's doubling by reverberating the pronoun name "I" throughout generations of enslaved peoples. In this sense, her statements are haunted by the cruel robbery of her original identity by slave masters and also haunts the British psyche by insisting that she is the credible source here, and her oratory will always outweigh their attempts to discredit her lived experience. Furthermore, Prince's simile that white people's apathy towards Black slaves in the marketplace "fell like cayenne [...] on our hearts" (11) further resists assimilation by insisting on her African-ness. Deploying the flavours of home, Prince retains her authentic voice amidst white editorial revisions but she also calls attention to the violent dislocation that slavery enforces on Black bodies. In essence, the cultural familiarity of cayenne is made 'uncanny' because it now doubles as "a thing of terror," a warped symbol that once "wore a more friendly aspect" (Freud 236). These two examples highlight the ideological violence of the Gothic imaginary placed on Prince's body and narrative voice by highlighting the tensions between moderated and free speech, assimilation and cultural authenticity that she navigates.

Additionally, Prince's Mother acts as a traditional Gothic double in that she comes to symbolize the muted side of Prince that is deeply traumatized by the events of her life. The narrative mostly follows a 'progress' trajectory (i.e., from dark to light, enslavement to freedom) that is comforting to English readers who are complicit in their wilful ignorance towards slavery. However, Prince's narrative includes a counter-arc that disrupts this smoothing over of her history—another refusal to concede to the revisionist practices of her white editors. For example, Prince bears witness to her mother's damaged psyche after a decade of separation: "but when I saw my poor mammy my joy was turned to sorrow, for she had gone from her senses. [...] She did not know me" (Prince 23). Prince insists on the woundedness of this experience and does not concede to the progress narrative, enshrining the practice of remembering the human prices paid along the way. She demonstrates that trauma warps the familiar (or the familial) and makes it barely recognizable but vaguely familiar; this process follows Freud's definition of the uncanny as "that class of the frightening which leads us back to what is known of old and long familiar" (220). In

other words, her mother, who she recognizes in body, but whose mind is frighteningly altered. In her chapter "Colonial and Postcolonial Gothic: The Caribbean," Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert echoes the sentiment that the production of terror in many slave narratives rests on the tense Gothic "colonial space [...] where the familiar and unfamiliar mingle in an uneasy truce" (3). Prince's text then highlights the privilege of the Gothic being a theoretical venture; the titillating violence postulated by Gothic fiction is a terrifying reality for Black people who have this 'theory' and literary tension applied to their bodies. Prince's mother symbolizes the Freudian double in "having been an assurance of immortality" (Freud 235) as a symbol of life-creation and genealogical lineage that now "becomes the uncanny harbinger of death" (235). Prince's mother, as with all enslaved, are constantly subjected to various forms of death: social, psychological, and even physical. Prince's recognition of her mother's wounded psyche acts as her haunted 'mirror'; Prince's text thus embodies the Gothic conventions set out in the genre's first novel by Walpole of "allow[ing] terror to circulate via process of identification and projection" (Clery 25). In encountering her mother, she too is confronted with the mental toll that relentless relocation, forced labour, and bodily torture has on her. Throughout her rather restrained narration for the sake of 'reliability,' Prince still relives the trauma of her experience. So, though her narrative allows Britons to *imagine* what slavery is like, she also makes clear that this permission to observe and look in on Black tragedy is a form of complicity in the slave trade, indicting the vicarious ethos of the Gothic imaginary.

As we can see, the barriers between what constitutes mental versus physical trauma start to collapse within Mary Prince's text as she deconstructs the binary by sharing her mental process during her whippings. Eighteenth century writers often "posit terror as a phenomenon of the psyche, capable of transcending corporeality, and horror as somatic, carnal, revolting, and transgressive" (Creech, slide 8), attempting to divorce them from another as if the mind and the body are not in constant communication. However, describing experience being sold in the marketplace, Prince binds mental anguish to her somatic symptoms: "My heart throbbed with grief and terror so violently, that I pressed my hands quite tightly across my breast, but I could not keep it still, and it continued to leap as though it would burst out of my body. But who cared for that?" (Prince 11). Her rhetorical question emphasizes the isolation she feels intuitively, even amongst her siblings, and she even physically attempts to stifle her body's reaction to psychological panic. Prince further ties the bodily experience to the mind through a metaphor of education. She states that her female slave-owner "taught me (how can I ever forget it!) [...] to know the exact difference between the smart of the rope, the cart-whip, and the cow-skin, when applied to my naked body by her own cruel hand" (14). Prince couches her knowledge of the various modes and sensations of torture in a language of skill or understanding; her ability to discern tools horrifyingly comes through application, not objective study. In her book *Subjects of Slavery, Agents of Change: Women and Power in Gothic Novels and Slave Narratives*, Kari J. Winter argues that enslaved

women maintained their power through verbal expression by "constantly wag[ing] a linguistic war against their masters" (32). Prince demonstrates this in her bracketed interjection; it is a verbal exclamation that is transcribed by her white peers, a preserved speech act that highlights the psychology of torture. She is not imagining or projecting; her "(how can I ever forget it!)" (Prince 14) interrupts a passage depicting her master's violence, syntactically reifying the mental impression that physical abuse leaves on victims. The memory is not only branded onto her skin, it is contained within her mind and rears its head throughout her life beyond slavery, much like her abrupt interjection here does not allow the reader to forget that the impact is lasting. Saidiya Hartman's chapter "Innocent Amusements: The Stage of Sufferance" illustrates the complications of slave narratives capacity for honouring a formerly enslaved person's humanity because depictions of violence "literally remov[e] the slave from view as pain is brought close" (20). This is especially true of the Appendix to Prince's text in which her white female peers must prove the existence of her scars as "inquiries have been made" (Prince 64) about them. They confirm that "'the whole of the back part of her body is distinctly scarred, and, as it were, *chequered*, with the vestiges of severe floggings" which they offer up as "full and authentic evidence" (64), catering to what Hartman calls an "anxiety [...] historically determined by the denial of black sentience" (19). While the appendix does serve to divorce the body from the mind or emotion, as the eighteenth-century Gothic attempts to do, Prince's insistence on bearing witness to others and her own lived experiences undoes this binary. Her text illustrates the attempts by Western society to enshrine these divisions and offers a lens that sees through them, troubles them. Ultimately, Prince does enshrine a sense of humanity into the text, no matter how haunting it may be.

Prince's listing of names crafts a metatextual graveyard for the slaves she encountered and her recurring allusions to saltwater as an environment and a bodily fluid further disrupts the Gothic division between mental terror and bodily horror. These both work to inscribe the enslaved individuals' humanity into the historical record, rather than allow the violence of the experience to outweigh them as Hartman suggests. In her book *Darkly: Black History and America's Gothic Soul*, Leila Taylor argues that the Gothic reality of Transatlantic Slavery lies in "the horror of these deaths along the Middle Passage" where there is a "lack of memorialization—these are the unknown, the unnamed, lives that have disappeared [...] deaths destined for haunting" (41). Prince works against the systematic forgetting that Taylor locates in colonial Gothic texts by explicitly naming and witnessing the lives of the other enslaved people she meets in her life. She honours the histories of "two little slave boys in the house" (Prince 14) as best she can, recounting their names and origin stories to the best of her knowledge: "Cyrus, who had been bought while an infant in his mother's arms; the other, Jack, was an African from the coast of Guinea, whom a sailor had given or sold to my master" (14-15). Furthermore, there is the live funeral that her mother is forced to enact in the marketplace when her children are sold. She is "weeping for the loss of her children" and exclaims "in a sorrowful voice, (I shall

never forget it!) 'See, I am *shrouding* my poor children; what a task for a mother!" (10, original emphasis). Although her children are not dead, they are effectively sentenced to a social death in which their names, cultures, families, and humanity will be stripped away, executed. Prince's mother anticipates both the social and potential physical deaths of her children in enslavement; she links the marketplace to the preparation of bodies for burial, announcing that sending her children to be sold is like wrapping them in burial cloth. In this sense, Prince's text revises the Gothic tradition of a literal graveyard, suggesting that to be put to death before your body perishes is unique to the slave population—an experience the Gothic imaginary voraciously preys on.

By laying the grounds for death early on, Prince's text sets the stage for subsequent ghosts or hauntings, which manifest as saltwater; a synecdoche for the Atlantic Ocean that is the grave for many kidnapped Africans. In her presentation "Mary Robinson and Gothic Nature," Alex Wagstaffe defines Gothic Nature as an 'interrupted pastoral': a dangerous, untameable space that instills fear and embodies terror. Traditional Gothic natures include atmospheres of "foggy darkness and English damp" (Taylor 44) but Taylor argues that the enforced dislocation mechanism of Transatlantic slavery allows for the reworking and relocation of this concept. Prince's account of working "through the heat of the day; the sun flaming upon our heads like fire, and raising salt blisters" (Prince 19) on uncovered skin is thus similar to Taylor's Southern Gothic nature of "sweltering humidity and oppressively blinding sun" (Taylor 44). In these accounts, it is the climate that is spectral, haunting the bodies of the enslaved. For Prince, this is the saltwater that she is forced to work in. It infiltrates the skin and creates "dreadful boils, which eat down in some cases to the very bone" (Prince 19); the enslaved are forced to go down to the very sea they were transported across "where [they] washed the pickle from their limbs" (19). While this may seem like a purely physical affliction, Prince once again crumbles the binary between the physical horror and psychological terror of this experience as the saltwater resurfaces in her own tears and her mother's psychosis. In a rare outburst within her measured cadence, Prince exclaims, "Oh, the trials! the trials! they make the salt water come into my eyes when I think of the days in which I was afflicted" (13). The psychological damage that slavery has inflicted distresses Prince as she recounts it, and the ocean her ancestors were forced to cross symbolically wells up in her saline tears. Another example of the embodiment of Transatlantic Slavery Gothic nature is Prince's disoriented mother's terror at having "been under the vessel's bottom" (23). Her mother's belief that she has been dragged under the slave ship captures the metaphor of slavery; that the sick and dying Africans who were thrown overboard into the Atlantic and even those who survived to the other side all come out drowned, saltwater filling their bodies. Prince's practice of naming alongside the symbol of saltwater as a metaphor for the Middle Passage again reworks the Gothic "haunting [that] can take many forms" (Hogle 2). In this case, the spectre that haunts the world is the Atlantic Ocean itself—constantly licking the shores of Britain and America in a terrifying reminder that the Earth has

witnessed their crimes, and their victims' ghosts surround them.

Despite being bracketed by supplements by white editors, Prince's narrative proper calls on the Black body and voice, the geographic environments of plantations, and the Atlantic Ocean to solidify her authentic account and empower an authentic voice throughout. What Prince does for the Gothic genre is reveal the real-life terrors that electrify the genre's creative project, reminding readers that actual human beings exist at the root of these literary devices and should not be obscured behind the theoretical or artistic. Insisting upon the psychological impact of the viciously physical experience of slavery, Prince troubles the Gothic binary between mental terror and corporeal horror. In so doing, she reveals that this deconstruction has origins far older than modern Gothic literature and critiques the Gothic imaginary for its fetishization of imagined violence that writes over the lived experiences of Black enslaved people.

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