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Agency, Gender, and the Law in Slave Narratives

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COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCES

AGENCY, GENDER, AND THE LAW IN SLAVE NARRATIVES

By

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR GRADUATION WITH HONORS IN
THE MAJOR

Degree Awarded:

Spring, 2014

Abstract

This thesis examines the presence of legal institutions in the accounts of enslaved and apprenticed people who resided in the British colonies of Jamaica, Antigua and Mauritius. Focusing on the lives of three individuals, Mary Prince, James Williams, and Marie Saladin, this thesis integrates enslaved persons' presence in and interaction with legal institutions into the wider scope of what it meant to be enslaved during the nineteenth century on a British colony. To do so, the thesis observes the common elements discussed and represented in accounts of enslaved people and analyses the concept of a slave narrative.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	1
Introduction: The Importance of the Slave’s Narrative	4
Chapter One: What is a Slave Narrative?	9
Chapter Two: Descriptions of Slave Life	19
Chapter Three: Interactions with Legal Institutions and Authority Figures	31
Chapter Four: Enslaved Women’s Portrayal in Legal Institutions	42
Conclusion	49
Bibliography	52

Introduction: The Importance of the Slave's Narrative

*“Argument provokes argument, reason is met with sophistry. But narratives go right to the hearts of men.”*¹

A tactful and compelling narrative can inspire individuals to action, as did many accounts published during the early nineteenth century by enslaved people across the Atlantic world. But the purpose of the slave's narrative was not solely to serve as kindling for the abolition movement. Much of the research and analysis regarding slave narratives has focused on topics such as the authenticity of these accounts, or the ways in which abolitionists utilized and possibly fabricated some of these stories to garner public support for their cause. A less common approach to these documents is examining the stories for the purpose of gaining greater insight into ways enslaved peoples were part of the legal landscape and how they were able to traverse legal and judicial systems. This may be because for some time, these narratives were not considered historical documents.²

Questions of authenticity have often been discussed when speaking of narratives based on the intended audience and the way in which the accounts were transcribed and utilized by abolitionists. This paper does not evaluate the “authenticity” of slave narratives, but it does attempt to draw out the experiences of people of color from these narratives in their various forms: autobiographies, trial testimony, letters, appeals to the Privy Council, and interviews for reports to the House of Commons, to demonstrate the ways in which enslaved people attempted to gain agency from a justice system which was often used against them, as a source of violence and exploitation by their oppressors.

¹ Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Slave's Narrative* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1985,) xvii.

² *Ibid*, xii.

Enslaved peoples utilized the legal system, serving as a source of agency to share their stories and assert their rights as human beings. However, these legal systems were also places where the violence enslaved people faced was legalized and further perpetuated. So the legal system was also a place of further oppression and subjugation for enslaved people. This inherent contradiction in the role of legal institutions for enslaved people will be the focal point of this paper. The presence and importance of legal institutions is an essential element to many accounts from enslaved or formerly enslaved people, and therefore appears in some form, such as a court case or punishment from a master or magistrate, in these narratives.

In Seymour Drescher's major work, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Anti-Slavery*, Drescher distinguishes "societies with slaves" from "slave societies." In societies with slaves, "the distinction between slaves and other subordinate groups portrayed as more porous and ambiguous...."³ These communities also possessed smaller numbers of slaves who typically worked in domestic positions. In slave societies, the number of enslaved people often outnumbered free persons. In this kind of environment, "slavery became the normative model of social relationships at the center of economic production," determining the societal structure which was based on keeping the enslaved oppressed and with a lack of agency to maintain the

³ Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Anti-Slavery* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 6. Drescher's work recounts the history of slavery and anti-slavery around the world, and in relation to the time period for this paper, he outlines the movement for emancipation from 1815 until 1838 with a special focus on how this movement set the stage for the expansion of British antislavery movements on an international scale, the increased role of women and religious organizations, and the role that slave revolts played in encouraging emancipation, the clearest example being the Baptist War.

profitable economic practices.⁴ Enslaved persons discussed in this paper encompass those who resided in British colonies which functioned as slave societies.

Defining Slavery

The definition of slavery and the slave remain disputed and ever-changing. The modern day definition for human trafficking, a system that mirrors slavery in several ways uses determinants of force, fraud, and/or coercion by the trafficker against the trafficking victim.⁵ This definition encapsulates the complex relationships which slavery often produced, and leaves out the qualification of the enslaved person as legal property, a disputed factor in several enslaved person's cases for freedom.

Others categorize slavery to the slavery [sic] which was commonplace on the North American Continent and Caribbean, which contrasted slavery with freedom: whereas a free individual enjoyed basic rights of citizenship, choice of occupation and lifestyle, and security of person and property, the slave was a chattel with hereditary status. Slaves thus formed a separate economic group.⁶

This definition will be most fitting for this paper, as the colonies discussed in detail practiced a chattel form of slavery, in which enslaved people were considered property. But this definition does contrast from other forms of slavery in places like the Indian Ocean, where slavery was oftentimes not clearly defined and sometimes considered voluntary.

⁴ Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Anti-Slavery*, 6.

⁵ Terry Coonan (lecture, Human Rights and State Crime (Course), October 2012).

⁶ Gwyn Campbell, "Slavery and Other Forms of Unfree Labor in the Indian Ocean World," introduction to *Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2003), x-xi. In the text, Campbell notes that there is no consensus as to the meaning of slavery in the IOW, but slavery in the Mascarene Islands did resemble that of chattel slavery most closely. Campbell also discusses the way that slavery in this area was also based on those enslaved being outsiders to the owner population, which developed into a 'physionomically distinct' nature about enslaved people for the most part in slavery of the Atlantic world, later bring race as a vital factor in the division of these societies.

The term “slave” will be mostly omitted from this text and replaced with the term “enslaved person.” The use of the phrase “enslaved person” rather than “slave” relates to humanizing the enslaved narrators which will appear in this text. The term slave often implies chattel slavery to most people. This person first phrasing also allows for a more porous definition, which may be inclusive of other forms of slavery in which the social structure of the society was not completely determined by the institution of slavery. This term also notes the fluctuating nature of some status or standing, as many enslaved in the Indian Ocean World would go from enslaved to formerly enslaved. The use of the term enslaved person also humanizes the individual, allowing for a greater sense of identity, other than the forced labor they performed, something which all the narrative authors illustrate.

Structure of the Thesis

Chapter one will provide an overview on slave narratives: their typical structure, common usages, and various forms of the slave narratives, based on the format of the narrative, the context and use of the narrative and the geographical locations, using the narrative of Olaudah Equiano as an archetype. Chapter two will introduce the narratives of James Williams, Mary Prince, and Marie Saladin by providing an overview of their testimony, the colonies they were enslaved in, and the original usage for the account. All enslaved in British colonies in the nineteenth century, these narratives do have several similarities, but they also differ based on time period, geographic location, and the circumstances which brought their cases to be seen by legal institutions.

Chapter three examines the main argument of the paper, the presence of legal institutions as another vital theme appearing in many narratives of enslaved people, and the inherent

contradiction of the legal system as a site of agency and oppression for enslaved people. Chapter Four examines gender as another essential aspect to slave narratives, focusing on the varying ways that men and women tell their stories about living enslaved, the importance of a more multifaceted image of enslaved women, and how legal institutions interact with them differently.

Chapter One: What is a Slave Narrative?

Scholars speaking on American slavery in the South, such as Henry Louis Gates Jr., define a slave narrative as “the written and dictated testimonies of the enslavement of black human beings.”⁷ Gates’ definition includes an expansive delineation of the enslaved in American slave societies yet applies to and encompasses other individuals who experienced slavery in the nineteenth century. This definition is significant because it encompasses individuals and artistic mediums who experienced slavery in the nineteenth century that differ from more well-known autobiographical narratives of Solomon Northup or Olaudah Equiano, two men who were enslaved and later wrote and published their stories in support of abolitionists in the United States and Great Britain. In the context of the British Empire, the term requires an expansion to include more people of color who were enslaved in India and other parts of Asia.⁸

These individuals’ experiences are essential to our history, but are not representative of the experiences of most enslaved people of the time. Many of the accounts by enslaved people in the British West Indies draw from testimony written or transcribed by others, specifically in the context of legal record.⁹ Without this expansive definition of a slave narrative, the rich and

⁷ Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Slave’s Narrative* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1985,) xii.

⁸ Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, ed. Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1968.) The narrative of Solomon Northup, *12 Years a Slave*, was published in 1853 during the American abolition movement, telling the story of a free man from New York’s abduction into slavery. Like Olaudah Equiano’s story (which will be discussed later), the account was vastly popular, utilized by abolitionists, and was autobiographical in format.

⁹ Nicole Aljoe, ““Going to Law”: Legal Discourse and Testimony in Early West Indian Slave Narratives,” *Early American Literature* 46, no. 2 (2011): 351-381. In her article, Aljoe discusses the legal context in which slave testimony was recorded and utilized by abolitionists, and how this affects the narrative, by analyzing the use of the narratives of three enslaved people on different colonial islands: James Williams, Mary Prince, and Ashton Warner.

varied experiences of many West Indian slaves would only show the experiences of former slaves like Equiano, whose story is remarkable but not illustrative of most enslaved people in plantation style slavery systems. Including accounts which originate from legal contexts, such as court testimony, evidence from a formal report, or a petition or appeal, opens up a whole new area of exploration for historians discovering how enslaved peoples lived in the nineteenth century and beyond. It also allows us to examine the presence of enslaved peoples' interactions with legal institutions, as others have examined the presence of various themes and qualities of slave narratives, such as religious testimony and conversion or the way in which enslaved women were represented versus how they represented themselves within legal institutions.

Qualities of Slave Narratives

As the most popular form of documentation preserving the lives of enslaved and formerly enslaved peoples, the slave narrative is the first historical document most turn to when studying enslaved peoples in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The slave narrative remains one of the few popular mediums which enslaved people used to tell their stories in slave societies like the British Caribbean and the American South, in which the plantation style of chattel slavery was dominant. These narratives shaped the larger narrative of West Indian slavery and what life was like for an enslaved person, and typically touched on similar themes. Enslaved persons' accounts also maintain a certain filter, in order to appeal to their audience and as a result of editors, as both the audience and those who edited their accounts were white British people who judged the validity of their statements.

One such narrative exemplary of the typical slave narrative, based on format and popularity, is *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*, one of the most popular slave narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. First published in 1789 the text serves not only as a slave narrative, but an adventurous travel account, and religious testimony of Equiano's life. His varied experiences as a laborer, clerk, hair dresser, house servant, and ship worker allowed him to observe various conditions of slavery in the Atlantic world, specifically the West Indies.¹⁰ The accounts observing these conditions are invaluable to our understanding of slave treatment, but Equiano's experience as a slave and free black are out of the ordinary compared to most blacks in his time. In *Capitalism and Antislavery*, Seymour Drescher notes the extraordinary nature of Equiano's story:

Very few individuals actually understood or experienced the full range of human relationships embodied in the Atlantic economies. People like the African Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) who passed through the full cycle from capture in Africa through slavery in the Americas to freedom, intermarriage and ultimately into abolitionism in England were quite exceptional.¹¹

As an accomplished and well known black in Britain, Equiano was capable of authoring and advertising his "Interesting Narrative," and gained a readership of members from the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. In 1789, the year of its original publication, classified ads for the narrative appeared in newspapers in London, including the *World*, outlining the content of

¹⁰ Olaudah Equiano. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, the African: An Authoritative Text*. 1st. ed. (New York: Norton. 2001).

¹¹ Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilization in Comparative Perspective* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 22-23.

the narrative and the numerous places where it could be purchased.¹² These ads illustrate the wide range of readership and Equiano's reputation during the time. Another element in print media which proves the dominance of Equiano's narrative are mentions of his narrative within other news stories. In a 1789 news story regarding a beautiful Duchess and her admirer Equiano is referenced; "declaring that the sight of such a model of perfection inspired equal admiration in him... as the sight of a fall of snow did in Oludah Equiano, on his arrival in England!"¹³ This reference to Equiano's narrative, though minor, demonstrates the larger cultural significance the narrative had on the public and the appeal of his story. It also indicates the effectiveness of the typical slave narrative writing style which Equiano employs masterfully in his account.

Equiano's self-published autobiography was also recognized by the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade and supported the movement for the abolition of the slave trade. Many slave narratives of the late eighteenth century are comprised of certain elements that contributed to how well they related with their audience, comprised of mostly white middle class people who had never travelled to the West Indies. To appeal to his readership, Equiano's narrative speaks on themes which were important to his audience such as Christianity, appealing to the reader through literary and biblical references and calling for the support of abolition of the slave trade through the campaigns of antislavery societies. Equiano's religious devotion is made clear throughout his narrative, beginning with the cover page of the text with a biblical reference:

¹² "On Thursday March 26, Will be Published, in 2 Vol., the Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself.," *World* (London), March 24, 1789, Classified Ads, accessed April 5, 2013, 17th-18th Century Burney Collection Online.

¹³ "Non Sum Qualis Eram!," *Oracle Bell's New World* (London), August 12, 1789, News, accessed April 1, 2013, 17th-18th Century Burney Collection Online.

Behold God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid, for the Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation. And in that day shall ye say, Praise the Lord, call upon his name, declare his doings among the people. Isiah, XII 2.4¹⁴

This biblical reference displays Equiano's religious zeal and allows his audience to relate to him in a deeper, more meaningful way. Angelo Costanzo notes, Equiano knew the audience of his autobiography and was effective in writing to appeal to them, as many abolitionist societies were associated with religious institutions.¹⁵

The use of these literary devices in typical slave narratives exposes a shift in the purpose of the narrative; instead of recounting an experience, the text becomes an attempt to convince the reader, changing the nature of the account. In making his narrative appeal to the British antislavery readership, Equiano's story became a tool of the abolition movement, representing the "fashionable consumption of popular representations of British-African relationships... transformed them from mastery to patronage."¹⁶ It ultimately takes away from the authenticity of the account, as the story becomes something to be used to rouse people to action, rather than an honest telling of the slave experience.

Another element common to accounts of enslaved peoples is an appeal to the audience in an effort to convince the readers to oppose slavery. This technique is seen in Equiano's narrative

¹⁴ Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, Cover Page.

¹⁵ Angelo Costanzo, *Surprising Narrative: Olaudah Equiano and the Beginnings of Black Autobiography* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987).

¹⁶ Catherine Molineux, *Faces of Perfect Ebony: Encountering Atlantic Slavery in Imperial Britain* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 62. For a discussion regarding the authenticity of Equiano's account the possible fabrication of some of the events of Equiano's narrative as a means to garner support for the abolition of the slave trade, see Vincent Carretta, *Equiano, the African: Biography of a self-made man*. (University of Georgia Press, 2005).

through the structure and literary devices employed in the account, such as metaphors and references to popular philosophers, and the discussion of his experiences from the perspective of a “retrospective observer.”¹⁷ One example of this technique appears after Equiano’s reflection on several of the horrible instances of mistreatment of slaves: “Such a tendency has the slave trade to debauch men’s minds, and harden them to every feeling of humanity!”¹⁸ This literary tool allowed readers to relate to the narrative by noting emotional responses Equiano felt in the present as he was reflecting on the experiences of his past, a pathos evoking technique which might incite people to act against slavery.

Like many slave narratives, Equiano’s narrative also provides various descriptions of everyday life, noting specifically the cruel treatment he experienced and specifically the horrible treatment which other slaves experienced, to assist white middle-class audiences in understanding an environment not relatable to most of their life experiences. Equiano articulates the many horrors of slavery that he observes in the West Indies and the Americas; sexual assault, torture, suicide, and malnutrition; “It was almost a constant practice with our clerks, and other whites, to commit violent depredations on the chastity of the female slaves...” and, “I have seen a negro beaten till some of his bones were broken, for even letting a pot boil over.”¹⁹ These descriptions are an element of all accounts by enslaved people, as physical and mental violence was an integral part of oppression which helped to maintain slavery as an institution.

¹⁷ Charlotte Sussman, *Consuming Anxieties: Consumer Protest, Gender, and British Slavery, 1713-1833* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000,) 130-158. Sussman uses this term in describing one characteristic of narratives popularized by abolitionists. It is a literary technique in which the person experiencing something firsthand, retells their account as they remember it, while also speaking about their current feelings toward the past event.

¹⁸ Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, 83.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 77, 80.

Transcribed Accounts

Accounts specifically gathered for use in court or as evidence will be the main focus of this thesis, as this form of narrative account shows the interaction of enslaved people with the court and legal systems more vividly. The accounts of three individuals, Mary Prince from Barbados, James Williams from Jamaica, and Marie Saladin from Mauritius, were all utilized in the British legal system in some way, and are all transcribed accounts, written by someone else but based on their remarks. The transcribers attempted to capture the details of what they found most important about the narrative, gathering the most vital facts based on the context which the account would be used in. These accounts were affected by their interactions with white dominated legal institutions and white transcribers, who filtered the voices of enslaved people in a different way from the slave narratives formatted like those of Equiano. These narratives do include several of the elements exhibited in the Equiano narrative, including the appeal to readers through religious appeals, describing the horrors of day to day life as a slave. These accounts also have the distinctive element of describing the daily interactions of enslaved peoples with legal institutions, which include the court systems, local magistrates, and the laws in place in the colonies to ‘ameliorate’ their condition.

Enslaved individuals and people of color had minimal rights in the British colonial judicial system. Their limited rights included the ability to testify in court for claims of slave abuse and to serve as witnesses when no other person was present.²⁰ The majority of these kinds of

²⁰ Robert E. Luster, *The Amelioration of the Slaves in the British Empire, 1790-1833* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 38. Luster outlines in this text, the legal and social programs employed in the colonies of Jamaica, Mauritius, and Cape Colony to improve the living conditions of enslaved peoples in the early nineteenth century. The text provides an overview on a variety of programs including secular and religious education, access to courts, religious conversion, and the frequency of manumission.

narratives originate from the British West Indies, and are found in abolitionist publications such as the *British and Foreign Antislavery Society* and *The Liberator*, as well as in government records such as Select Committee Reports for the House of Commons and Privy Council Court Records. Chapter three will discuss these topics in further detail.

Many of the literary strategies in the Equiano narrative and other autobiographical narratives appear in the transcribed narratives of West Indian slaves, but based on their context they also employ several other strategies based on validating legal claims, and serve as “legal depositions.”²¹ As records used in various legal contexts, these narratives possess some distinct qualities in order to establish them as official and authoritative documents on the day to day lives of enslaved people. Aljoe notes that these narratives “were envisioned and created as legal documents intended to provide the truth of slavery....”²² With a shift in the intention of the narrative, a change occurs in the format, although there are some constants and similar tools appearing in autobiographical accounts. These include references to religion and spirituality, chilling descriptions of daily treatment and living conditions, and descriptions of the conditions of enslaved women and the elderly.

In her article, *Going to Law*, Nicole Aljoe also raises interesting questions regarding the differences between West Indies slave narratives with other narratives, noting the way that narratives based on the geographical location and legal structure were utilized by abolitionists and the legal system. She compares their testimonies in some cases to a legal disposition; “Just as in a legal deposition, we are assured of the validity of these texts because we have a transcript

²¹Aljoe, "Going to Law," 8.

²² Ibid, 8.

of their “real” spoken words.”²³ Accounts of the lives of enslaved people were often used within the courts and legal system, but the accounts discussed in this paper were framed for the British colonial legal and judicial systems.

This comparison of testimony gathered from those enslaved within the British Empire to legal documents speaks to how the structure of these narratives was affected by their purpose as legal evidence illustrating the horrors of slavery. Through these accounts, enslaved peoples in colonies like Jamaica and Mauritius showcased the actions of their oppressors to a society which saw the institution as valid and necessary but had little voice in the public arena compared to the rest of the society around them.

There are similar qualities with other autobiographical slave narrative accounts. In the legal accounts, aspects that differ from other slave narratives include recounting and often quoting the words and actions of their masters and other authority figures, and noting specific details such as the names of everyone present, locations, and lengths of time. Aljoe notes in her work, “All...slave narrators testify to their experiences of slavery in the same manner that a witness would testify in a court of law— by providing details about what they had seen and experienced.”²⁴

Ultimately, the narrative testimonies of Mary Prince, James Williams and Marie Saladin demonstrate the inherent flaws in the institution of slavery, but in a way which seems to stand out from other narratives. They illustrate not only the moral flaws of slavery, but also the flaws with the very institution from a logical position. The narratives also show us the ways in which the legal system was utilized by enslaved people as a source of agency, but also used against

²³ Ibid, 8.

²⁴ Aljoe, “Going to Law,” 6.

them as a source of exploitation. Descriptions of punishments with no actual basis and sentences in the penal workhouses as a form of protection showcase the ways in which life as a slave directly countered rights afforded to those who were 'free,' tearing away at the legal and justice systems held in such high esteem.

Chapter Two: Descriptions of Slave Life

This chapter will introduce three narratives from enslaved people from the British Colonial Islands of Antigua, Bermuda, Jamaica and Mauritius. Slavery varied on each of these islands based on the colonial governments, population, and geographical location, but all possessed parallels in the treatment of enslaved people, the laws regulating their rights, and the ability of enslaved people to represent themselves in legal institutions.

In the British Caribbean colonial holdings such as Jamaica and Antigua, societal structures were based on slavery economically and socially. These societies easily illustrated the oppression and mistreatment of the system. For these reasons, British abolitionists focused on the Caribbean in their anti-slavery campaigns, and most published accounts of slavery are from this area of the British Empire, with similar formats and themes. Another reason British colonial holdings which had legalized slavery have various records of slave accounts, arises from the ability of slaves to appear as witnesses in the courts, and to bring charges against their masters for abuse, one aspect of slave “amelioration policy” during the 18th and 19th centuries in colonies like Jamaica and Mauritius.²⁵ One informal facet of this amelioration policy was manumission, a practice in slave societies like Jamaica and Mauritius in which a slave owner granted freedom to the enslaved person, typically with some kind of written legal document.²⁶

Mary Prince and Slavery in Bermuda and Antigua

²⁵ Robert E. Luster, *The Amelioration of the Slaves in the British Empire, 1790-1833* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 37.

²⁶ Luster, *The Amelioration of the Slaves*, 125.

First published in 1831, “*The History of Mary Prince a West Indian Slave, Related by herself*” was the first account of an escaped slave woman from the British West Indies.²⁷ The account of Mary Prince’s life was widely published in Britain and brought to a larger audience the unique perspective of a female slave who walked out of slavery and later testified in court to defend her account. After Mary Prince left the London residence of her owners in 1828, she sought out abolitionists for work and refuge and found the Antislavery Society. Thomas Pringle, an abolitionist, provided Prince with financial support and when her health allowed she worked as a domestic servant for members of the Antislavery Society.

Mary Prince’s account serves as a popularized yet chilling educational account of slavery from a woman’s perspective, first recorded by abolitionist and aspiring writer Susanna Strickland, upon the request of Prince who wanted to share her story for the people of Britain. The text was then edited and published by Antislavery Society secretary, Thomas Pringle. In the narrative, Mary Prince related to the audience her life of slavery in the British West Indies, recounting her time enslaved in Bermuda, Antigua, and London. Some of the most heart wrenching scenes, such as the separation of Mary Prince from her mother and brothers when she is sold, follow a similar format to other slave narratives which emphasize major life events and injustices which were a result of the institution of slavery.

Prince also candidly described the kind of work she performed and the treatment that enslaved people received from the owners and family, calling her owners “butchers.”²⁸ Her roles varied, working as a domestic servant in plantation homes raising children and doing household

²⁷ Mary Prince and Moira Ferguson, *The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave*, rev. ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

²⁸ Prince and Ferguson, *The History of Mary Prince*, 72.

chores while enslaved by Captain I and Mr. Myners and the Wood family, and harvesting salt in the salt marshes on Turks Island while enslaved under Mr. D. The treatment Mary Prince received from Mr. D proved to be the most brutal, and Prince discusses the horrible circumstances she witnessed and experienced harvesting salt, something not well known to British readers who were more familiar with the harvesting of sugar on picturesque plantations. She provides a detailed description of how damaging the harvesting was to the body, and the great work it required to provide the product which many of her readers may have enjoyed as a seasoning:

I was given a half barrel and a shovel, and had to stand up to my knees in the water... Our hands, feet and legs, from standing in the salt water for so many long hours, soon became full of dreadful boils, which eat down in some cases to the very bone, afflicting the sufferers with great torment.²⁹

After many years of working in salt ponds and enduring constant abuse from Mr. D, Prince accompanied Mr. D back to Bermuda and eventually was hired to do contract work at the Cedar Hills estate which the Wood family owned. Eventually the Wood family purchased Mary Prince from Mr. D and she lived in Antigua as household servant with less physically arduous duties. But Prince became ill with rheumatism and St. Anthony's fire, from the years of abuse and her time working in the salt ponds. From then on, Prince had great difficulty performing her assigned tasks and would defend herself from incorrect accusations, two qualities which the Wood family, specifically Mrs. Wood grew to resent greatly. Much of Prince's narration of her time in Antigua recounts her conflicts between her and Mrs. Wood. On several occasions, Prince took an active role in obtaining her freedom, attempting to acquire a new owner who would grant

²⁹ Prince and Ferguson, *The History of Mary Prince*, 71-72.

her manumission, and through selling pigs and other items to buy her freedom. Prince remained in Antigua for almost fifteen years and created a life outside of slavery for herself, joining a Methodist congregation of both enslaved and free blacks. Prince also met her husband, Daniel James, through attending services at the Moravian church, marrying him in 1826. These acts prompted greater resentment from the Woods and they became abusive towards her. While denying Prince's appeals for manumission the Woods sold other slaves instead. Prior to accompanying them to England, Prince noted an occasion in which she petitioned them for her freedom: "I was earnest in the request to my owners; but their hearts were too hard- too hard to consent. Mrs. Wood was very angry- she grew quite outrageous- she called me a black devil, and asked who had put freedom into my head."³⁰

Mary Prince told a story of great resistance to slavery and she was a wonderful story teller, showing awareness for her audience, understanding the importance of sharing her story frankly and explicitly as a way to honor the others she met along the way, who were not so fortunate to escape slavery. Prince's account displays several ways in which enslaved people gained agency for themselves and others, as she explicitly stated many times the ways in which she tried to improve her life and her memories of her fellow slaves is constantly referenced. Despite the authentic experiences Prince tells us in her account, the editing of her narrative by Strickland and Pringle of the Antislavery Society remains an issue.

Prince's narrative exhibits a more pronounced usage of collective pronouns such as 'we' and 'us' showing Prince's intuitiveness. "In telling my own sorrows, I cannot pass by those of

³⁰Prince and Ferugson, *The History of Mary Prince*, 85.

my fellow-slaves—for when I think of my own griefs, I remember theirs.”³¹ She tells others stories of immense suffering and great redemption, such as Old Daniel enslaved in the salt ponds under Mr. D, and Henry, a black overseer:

He [Henry] confessed that he had treated the slaves very cruelly; but said that he was compelled to obey the orders of his master. He prayed them all to forgive him, and he prayed that God would forgive him.³²

Mr. D- had a slave called old Daniel, whom he used to treat in the most cruel manner. Poor Daniel was lame in the hip and could not keep up with the rest of the slaves; and our master would order him to be stripped and laid down on the ground, and have him beaten with a rod of rough briar till his skin was quite red and raw. He would then call for a bucket of salt, and fling it upon the raw flesh till the man writhed on the ground like a worm, and screamed aloud with agony. This poor man’s wounds were never healed and I have often seen them full of maggots, which increased his torments to an intolerable degree. He was an object of pity and terror to the whole gang of slaves, and in his wretched case we saw, each of us, our own lot, if we should live to be as old.³³

The Mary Prince narrative was a highly controversial narrative, and the topic of two separate libel cases. Prince served as witness in both of the cases, on behalf of Mr. Thomas Pringle who was being challenged as editor and publisher of the account and an ardent abolitionist. In the 1833 *Pringle v. Cadell* case, Pringle accused the editor of Blackwood’s Magazine, Mr. Cadell, of libel for the remarks about Mr. Pringle and his family in a letter to Lord Grey.³⁴ The case however, has a larger relation to those in support of slavery, and those in favor of abolition. Pringle’s use of Mary Prince’s story was the impetus for this feud playing out in court, and the case showcases the way in which both abolitionists and the proslavery planter

³¹ Ibid, 75.

³² Prince and Ferguson, *The History of Mary Prince*, 83.

³³ Ibid, 74.

³⁴ Ibid, 137.

class exploited the stories of formerly enslaved people like Mary Prince to prove their ideological arguments. The abolition of slavery and the start of apprenticed labor also began only a few months later, with the Emancipation bill passing the House of Lords in July 1833.³⁵

In the second case for libel, *Wood v. Pringle*, the issue in question was the truth of Prince's statements in the narrative while enslaved by the Wood family. As a witness, Prince defended her claims of poor treatment. The Wood family, the plaintiffs in this case, claimed that Prince's statements in the narrative of "misconduct and cruelty" were not justified, and so the purpose of this case was to determine the truth of Prince's claims in the narrative. When called as a witness for the defendant (Pringle), she was able to counter the claims of her supposed 'laziness' and her unwillingness to perform her work with claims of her deteriorating health during her enslavement by the Woods' and the lack of care she received. Prince confirmed the statements she made in the narrative, but did not have anyone to corroborate her claims in court. The Wood family won the case, and Pringle was fined 25 pounds, the presiding judge claiming "the testimony of Mary Prince was exaggerated."³⁶ However, her testimony in court lent additional perspective to her transcribed narrative, as details of romantic or sexual relationships between Mary Prince and other men were omitted in the narrative, although she claimed that she told them to Susanna Strickland, who took down Prince's statements.

Prince's voice in her narrative and in the court room is a useful tool in the assortment of available accounts, as it corroborates the manner in which enslaved people and people of color were commonly portrayed in various texts in the nineteenth century. It also shows how transcribed accounts edited out details often thought to be too risqué for some of the religious

³⁵ Ibid, 28.

³⁶ Prince and Ferguson, *The History of Mary Prince*, 149.

readership. It serves as an essential text for the study of how enslaved people interacted with legal institutions despite its adjustments to appeal to the audience and a groundbreaking account from a formerly enslaved woman.

James Williams and Apprenticeship in Jamaica

Another example of a testimonial account comes from a report on the apprenticed labor system entitled, *The Narrative of Events by James Williams*. The report was published in 1838, for the Central Emancipation Committee as proof of the “atrocious cruelties perpetrated under the apprentice system.”³⁷ Williams’ account was part of a larger report gathered by a Commission of Inquiry on the apprentice system, after claims of slave abuse and mistreatment were reported, typically by those abolitionists who were in favor of full emancipation and an early end to the apprentice system.

After slavery was formally abolished in the British Empire with the Emancipation Bill of 1833, enslaved people become apprenticed laborers, as a six year tentative period between slavery and total emancipation for enslaved persons in British colonies. Under the apprentice system, slaves continued to work for their masters but were given days off to earn wages and provided the enslaved and slave holders with a period of time to shift out of the old dynamic which slavery created.

In the report, James Williams discusses his life as an apprenticed laborer in St. Ann’s parish, Jamaica. The account takes the format of an interview, as his responses are numbered and

³⁷ James Williams, *A Narrative of Events, since the First of August, 1834, by James Williams, an Apprenticed Labourer in Jamaica*, ed. Diana Paton, *Latin America Otherwise: Languages, Empires, Nations* (n.p.: Duke University Press, 2001), cover page.

seem like answers to questions not listed in the report. The motive of those who gathered William's report may have influenced some of his answers, as one of the first things he proclaims is, " Apprentices get a great deal more punishment now than they did when they was slaves."³⁸ The account does seem to have a focus on reflecting the legal issues with the apprentice, as Williams speaks of several of the freedoms apprenticed laborers were entitled to and which are rejected or denied to him. One example of this is Williams' failed attempts at earning and saving his own money or working on the land that was allotted to him. In the report, Williams recounts how Mr. Senior, his owner, fabricated various offenses to charge Williams and other apprenticed laborers with, so that he could punish them. The punishments were typically physical but also monetary, as Williams says that he had to pay '50 days out of his own time" for one occasion he was placed in the penal workhouse.³⁹

The oppressive hierarchy of slavery had not changed at all with the apprentice system, and therefore better treatment of formerly enslaved people could not be achieved without full emancipation and a change in the structure of the society which was reliant on profits from the exploitation of others. The role of the magistrate in the day to day decisions regarding the punishments of apprenticed laborers appeared to be even more intrusive and controlling than chattel slavery. This was in part because of the ways laws were made to protect enslaved people and apprenticed laborers, such as the presence of the magistrate to serve as a mediator between the master and workers, were tainted by the fact that the relationships between magistrate, courts and slave owners remained the same. This will be touched on in greater detail in the chapter regarding law and authority.

³⁸ Williams, *A Narrative of Events*, 2.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 5.

Similar to the narratives of Equiano and Mary Prince, James Williams' account also tells of the horrors which enslaved people faced, and the ways the apprenticeship system was worse than chattel slavery. The most graphic descriptions come from his descriptions of the penal workhouses, where apprenticed laborers were sent as one form of punishment by the magistrate. James Williams recounts the most brutal aspects of apprenticeship in Jamaica, being sent to the penal workhouse and the torture device called the treadmill. On the treadmill, apprenticed laborers and other convicts were placed on top of a rotating floor which the guards could change the speed, and in order to keep up you had to run or "dance" around it, otherwise you would fall and get whipped by guards. From Williams' experience, we see that this was a daily occurrence for all places in the workhouse, even for elderly and pregnant women. Williams chillingly describes one woman's encounter with the treadmill:

There was one old woman with grey head, belonging to Mr. Wallace, of Farm, and she could not dance the mill at all: she hang by the two wrists, which was strapped to the bar, and the driver kept on flogging her;- she get more than all the rest, her clothes cut off with the cat - the shoulder-strap cut with it, and her shift hang down over that side - then they flog upon that shoulder and cut it up very bad; but all the flogging couldn't make she dance the mill, and when she come down all her back covered with blood. They keep putting her on the mill for a week, and flog her every time, but when they see she could not dance it, they stop putting her on; if they no been stop, they would have kill her.⁴⁰

The Williams' account confirms that apprenticeship was really just slavery with a new name, as masters still viewed enslaved people as their property and found new ways to maintain the unequal, abusive, and dependent relationship with the new laws in place. According to Williams' account, his Master, Mr. Senior, used the increased law enforcement and supervision

⁴⁰ Williams, *A Narrative of Events*, 5.

from the magistrate to punish slaves for any action and increased the physical abuse as retaliation. The ultimate intention and audience of the report is distinguished with each of Williams' statements demonstrating the flawed aspects of the apprenticeship system. It is hard to ignore the bias of the white transcriber of Williams' account with the numbered formatting of Williams' statements and how the majority of Williams' statements relate back to the controversial aspects of the apprentice system, the penal workhouse and the presence of magistrates.

Marie Saladin and Slavery in Mauritius

In 1830 Marie Saladin, a woman from the island of Mauritius, filed a petition to the highest court in the British Empire, the Privy Council. The petition is an unusual and fascinating narrative because unlike the accounts of Prince and Williams, it focuses exclusively on a legal dispute between Marie Saladin and the Barillon estate. The formerly enslaved Marie Saladin claimed her freedom was based on a verbal agreement made with her former master, Madame Barillon. Unlike other accounts, the main legal dispute between Marie Saladin and Madame Barillon was the offer of freedom from slavery, rather than ill treatment from a master or libelous statements. As a transcribed account most likely written by a legal advocate, the petition presents a new filter with a different intention and intended audience, attempting to appeal to the judicial officials in Mauritius who were white slave owners and those serving on the Privy Council in London as well.

Marie Saladin was born on Mauritius, an island part of the Mascarene Islands in the Indian Ocean. Acquired by the British in 1810 from France, societal structure there mirrored sugar plantation economies of the West Indies which were based on chattel slavery. The island

was first colonized in 1639 by the Dutch East India Company with the intention of a slave economy being present on the island. Under both British and French rule, the island was colonized and settled in a similar way to the profitable sugar producing islands in the West Indies like Jamaica. This was made possible by the continually thriving, though outlawed, slave trade in the Indian Ocean and the island's dwindling slave population, due to maroonage and death from malnutrition.⁴¹

In 1809, when Madame Barillon returned to France, a verbal agreement was made between Marie Saladin and Madame Barillon, placing Saladin and her children into manumission, on the condition that Marie would work to pay for her and her children's freedom.⁴² The entire account appears in a legal format outlining the first case and appellate decisions, and revealing the complex legal landscape created to protect the institution of slavery and appease those opposed to it. After four separate cases and appeals, all ruling Marie Saladin and all her children be forced back into slavery, she made a final appeal to the Privy Council. The evidence in the case, like the evidence presented in Prince and Williams' accounts revealed a justice system which was inherently unjust, offering only a façade of a justice system to enslaved and formerly enslaved persons, while protecting the interests of slave owners.

The appeal to the Privy Council, presenting the case and account of Marie Saladin suggests an additional form of the slave narrative, told entirely within a legal context, with focus shifted away from the physical abuse and exploitation of slaves by their masters and towards

⁴¹ Richard B. Allen, "The Mascarene Slave-Trade and Labor Migration in the Indian Ocean during the Eighteen and Nineteenth Centuries," in *The Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia*, ed. Gywn Campbell (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2003), 37.

⁴² "Appeal of Marie Saladin (a slave) to HM in Council Against a Judgment of the Court of Appeal in Mauritius," 1831, TS 25/17, The National Archives, Public Record, Kew, London, United Kingdom.

their existence outside their day to day life as an enslaved person. Marie Saladin's account also revealed that enslaved people employed their stories in the court of law on their own terms, without any pressure or prompting from abolitionists or government reports on slavery.

The next two chapters will center on the themes of agency, gender and law in the narratives of Many Prince, James Williams and Marie Saladin. They will examine slave interaction with legal institutions, legal authority figures, and written law, as well as the way slave narratives from the perspective of women shift the popular images of enslaved women in the nineteenth century.

Chapter Three: Interactions with Legal Institutions and Authority Figures

This chapter will provide an illustration of the legal and judicial landscape in which enslaved people shared their stories and advocated for themselves, requiring great fortitude to stand up and represent themselves against a system which often excluded them from the same justice and rights others possessed from birth. Their accounts demonstrate the various ways slave testimony was utilized in the judicial system: as legal depositions recounting abuse of apprenticed laborers, to a defense against a libel suit, to the protection of their own freedom. The contradiction of the slave's narrative as a source of agency and oppression in legal institutions will remain a major theme in this chapter, looking at the different ways in which legal systems served as a place where enslaved people could share their experiences, but also where their stories could be used against them.

Interaction with Judicial Systems

Prior to 1831, representation of enslaved peoples and people of color in the Mauritius judicial system was quite limited. As in most British colonies, enslaved people could only serve as witnesses in cases of slave abuse, when there were no other white or free people of color witnesses present.⁴³ Marie Saladin and her family, as people of color (and disputably enslaved persons) were not granted the right to appear in court as the case was not related to the abuse of a slave. Unable to present her case in court, the petition to appeal notes an advocate assisted and represented the Saladin case and later appeals. The petition to the Privy Council is also written by a legal representative, whose identity is never indicated. Saladin's legal representation

⁴³ Robert E. Luster, *The Amelioration of the Slaves in the British Empire, 1790-1833* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 43.

provided the Council with some of details of Saladin's life, outlining Marie Saladin's life after enslavement under the auspices of Madame Barillon. The petition to the Privy Council provides no description of the work Marie or her children performed when they were enslaved, or any details about how they lived or were treated as slaves. In this way, Saladin's account differs from the accounts of Prince, Williams, and other enslaved persons, as the experience of enslavement is typically the focus of testimony from enslaved people.

However, the account does offer a glimpse into what Saladin's life was like after her enslavement. For almost twenty years, Saladin lived as a free woman on the island with her husband and had several children who were educated and raised as free people, as her husband Mr. Hammond was a free person of color and local blacksmith. Prior to this, in 1809, Madame Barillon left Mauritius to return to France for an extended period as the island transitioned from French to British rule. Before departing, Madame Barillon granted Marie freedom through verbal manumission, and offered her children conditional freedom, once Saladin raised enough money to purchase them.⁴⁴ The arrangement was left to be handled by the agent of the Barillon estate, Mr. Sacroix.

Marie Saladin was unable to pay for her freedom or her children's, but the agreement appeared to remain valid between both parties for almost two decades. From the facts of the case, it appears that two children born while Marie was still enslaved may have remained enslaved on the Barillon estate, but no details are given about either of them until the agent, Mr. Sacroix, attempted to sell her daughter to another estate. It is this action which prompted legal action from Saladin. With the help of a Kings' Advocate, Saladin submitted a request to the Chief Judge and

⁴⁴ "Appeal of Marie Saladin (a slave) to HM in Council Against a Judgment of the Court of Appeal in Mauritius," 1831, TS 25/17, The National Archives, Public Record, Kew, London, United Kingdom, 1.

Commissary of the Court of Mauritius. Early nineteenth century policy regarding the judicial practices required any allegation related to slaves and their masters to first be sent to the Procurer General for investigation to look for fault with an enslaved person's claim. After this investigation, the Commissary Court deemed the case of importance and brought it to a hearing.⁴⁵

Once Marie's request for a trial was approved, the first Court of First Instance heard the case, with Saladin serving as the plaintiff and Mr. Sefbre, the new agent of the Barillon estate serving as a stand in for Madam Barillon.⁴⁶ Mr. Sefbre also happened to be the presiding judge of the Court of First Instance. The Saladin family's legal representation appealed to the Privy Council after all the local courts and the appellate courts on the island of Mauritius decided in favor of placing Marie Saladin and all of her descendants (a total of fourteen children and grandchildren), back into the possession of the Barillon estate as slaves.

According to the records of the case, no written legal agreement was ever formulated regarding the manumission of Saladin and her family, although Saladin considered herself a free person after the informal agreement was made with Madame Barillon. She was even permitted to work on her own schedule and earn wages working for Madame Barillon's agent, Mr. Sacroix, to earn "full enfranchisement" for her children.⁴⁷

After Saladin's claim was validated, the Procurer General forwarded the case to the Court of First Instance, to decide on the matter of whether or not Marie Saladin and her family were

⁴⁵ "Appeal of Marie Saladin."

⁴⁶ Note: Mr. Sacroix was the former agent/manager of Madame Barillon's estate, but once he resigned, Mr. Sefbre took over the position.

⁴⁷ "Appeal of Marie Saladin."

still considered slaves or if the verbal manumission agreement was still valid. Marie Saladin, at the suggestion of legal counsel, also submitted evidence claiming she was born a free person, (to a white woman and black man) and was later enslaved under the pretense of adoption, to Madame Barillon's mother, Madame Quefel.⁴⁸ This claim that Saladin was never the legal property of anyone enflamed the judges, based on each court's response. The court also appears outraged that a formerly enslaved person would not be able to gather the proper funds, and even more angry that they would dare to challenge the statements and claims of white men and women to advocate for her family, a basic right afforded to other persons.

The major claims the court considered here include the claim of the Saladin family's freedom which depended upon an unpaid verbal manumission agreement, and the property right the Barillon estate claimed to Saladin and all her descendants, which was the assumed standard for enslaved or formerly enslaved people of color. In a similar case regarding the property rights versus a person's claim to freedom, Rebecca J. Scott presents the case of a woman named Adelaide, whose son is sold into slavery because a white man, Louis Noret, fabricated the claim of a debt owed to him by the family who once owned Adelaide. The court in New Orleans ruled that his claim permitted the selling of her son into slavery even though he was born free.⁴⁹ Scott outlines the shortcomings of the law in protecting people of color in various European colonial holdings in the nineteenth century. Her argument confirms that enslaved people and people of color were considered property first, human second, which raises "questions about the coherence

⁴⁸ "Appeal of Marie Saladin." Based on the manuscript of the case, I am unsure of the spelling of Marie Saladin's original owner. It also could be spelled Zuefel, Zuifel or Quifel.

⁴⁹ Rebecca J. Scott, "Paper Thin: Freedom and Re-enslavement in the Diaspora of the Haitian Revolution," *Law and History Review* 29, no. 4 (2011): 1073-75.

of the process by which a property right was alleged in human beings in the first place.”⁵⁰ This is the legal landscape that enslaved people and free people of color had to traverse, one that would rather oppress and subjugate than liberate.

On the second occasion the case was heard in the court system of Mauritius, the presiding judge in the decision, patronizingly states:

Considering that if even Marion could be considered as having still a right to claim the benefit of her Mistress’ benevolent disposition to decree the same now, after such conduct as she has been guilty of would be to offer a reward to the violation of the most sacred duties, and thus hold out a most pernicious example. Considering that Marion has not only omitted to avail herself of her Mistress’s favorable offer, but has rendered herself altogether unworthy of it in endeavoring by an act of ingratitude and calumny to obtain her freedom under a pretext that she was born free.⁵¹

Supposed “ingratitude” doomed Marie Saladin and her fourteen children and grandchildren to a life of slavery. Again, the inherent contradiction between agency and oppression is seen in the presence of an enslaved person in legal institutions. The law afforded Saladin minimal rights as a slave, to represent herself in court as a human being. However, the judges governing the case presumed her to be of a piece of property, as their occupations outside of court such as plantation owners and agents to estates, probably related to slavery. Marie attempted to navigate the system to advocate for herself and family, but the members of the court, white slave-owning men, saw her as no more than a tool for profit, certainly not someone who should disrespect or challenge the power dynamic which ensured their secure status.

⁵⁰ Scott, "Paper Thin: Freedom and Re-enslavement," 1064.

⁵¹"Appeal of Marie Saladin."

The presiding judge of the court of First Instance, Mr. Sefbre, was also the agent for the Barillon estate, and the individual who would benefit the most from Marie Saladin and her family becoming enslaved once again. He did not serve as a judge in the case (a substitute judge served in his place, Judge Colin) but his affiliation with the court and the power of his position certainly influenced the outcome of each court decision. Saladin's legal counsel noted this influence in the petition to the Privy Council stating: "That in his answer to that call [to court] Mr. Sefbre, holding twofold character of Judge and Defendant, succeeded in convincing the substitute of the procurer General that your Petitioner [Saladin] and her children were slaves...."⁵²

From the very first decision in the Court of First Instance to the last appeal made in Mauritius, Mr. Sefbre's position of power and influence over the judges was pervasive. It prevents Saladin from obtaining a fair and unbiased trial. The petition to the Privy Council even alleged that Mr. Sefbre forged some of the evidence used as part of his defense. The evidence in question was a letter which appeared suddenly in the second appellate case, supposedly stating that Madame Barillon, after agreeing to place Marie Saladin in manumission, had second thoughts about the agreement, and wrote to Sefbre about it.

Upon request of the document, Mr. Sefbre delayed presenting the letter to the court and then deviously placed it in with the rest of the evidence without notifying the court, as he had access to the case file as a judge. Saladin's defense requested to see the letter, but was never permitted to see it. This blatant example of injustice would have ended in mistrial in most other cases, for the conflict of interest present. But Mr. Sefbre's elevated position of power as a white

⁵² "Appeal of Marie Saladin."

estate agent and judge trumps Marie Saladin and her family's lower status and formerly enslaved and people of color, tainting the decision making skills of the judge unfairly in favor of Seffre and the Barillion estate.

Interaction with Legal Authority Figures and Procedural Flaws

"...Can your petitioner be justly disposed of that right under any of the considerations upon which the judgment of the court has been founded?"⁵³

Robert Luster notes that "justices and many members of the jury were slave owners, often with social, commercial, and political ties to the defendants."⁵⁴ As the final decision makers, local authority figures such as judges, magistrates, and estate agents impacted the justice system enslaved people faced in a negative way, affecting legal procedure and case decisions. The control authority figures possessed provided another avenue for controlling the lives of enslaved people calling into question the impartiality of British legal institutions.

Williams' account exhibits a similar form of control by white slave owners, for no other purpose but maintaining power and control. Williams is repeatedly punished by those in power for the sake of reinforcing the lack of power and agency which enslaved individuals possessed. Williams recounts one instance in the report while he was an apprenticed laborer in Jamaica, when his master Mr. Senior mocked his lack of agency in the judicial system:

Miss Senior was cursing at me, but I did not give any hearing to what she was saying. Massa was standing near the kitchen- he ask me what I had to say about it; I say, Sir, I have nothing to do with it, I don't interfere; he say You do interfere; I tell him no- he raise up his stick three times to lick me down. I said, you can't lick me down, Sir, the law does not allow that, and I

⁵³ "Appeal of Marie Saladin,"7.

⁵⁴ Luster, *Amelioration of the Slaves*, 38.

will go complain to magistrate if you strike me. He answer, he don't care for magistrate, he will lick the five pounds out of me that the magistrate will fine him....⁵⁵

Williams' simple reply to try and avoid conflict and the violence that Mr. Senior constantly inflicted, is met with a threat and a casual dismissal of the law made to protect enslaved human beings from mistreatment. This kind of "power over" another person was an essential component of the oppressive power structure of slavery and apprenticed labor and it appears in several other slave accounts.

James Williams' account explains the way in which the magistrates, designated to protect slaves from abusive masters, were often friendly and sympathetic to local slave-owners, protecting their interests above those of the enslaved. Magistrates had the power to determine a fitting punishment for slaves or apprenticed laborers, which in Jamaica often resulted in a sentence to the penal workhouse.⁵⁶ The penal workhouse was used as another punishment and controlling mechanism, and James Williams was placed in them several times for minor offenses. According to the "slave amelioration" laws, the workhouse was intended for slaves convicted of criminal offenses.⁵⁷ William's account confirms this, also noting the ways in which magistrates would often place slaves and apprenticed laborers in these houses for no reason at all or for minor offenses, such as talking back to a master. On one specific occasion, the magistrate determines Williams' punishment for the charge of "being insolent by manner," a claim Mr. Senior and the magistrate seem to create, mirrors the courts claim of Saladin's ingratitude:

⁵⁵ James Williams, *A Narrative of Events, since the First of August, 1834, by James Williams, an Apprenticed Labourer in Jamaica*, ed. Diana Paton, *Latin America Otherwise: Languages, Empires, Nations* (n.p.: Duke University Press, 2001), 7.

⁵⁶ Luster, *The Amelioration of the Slaves*, 41.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 41.

Mr. Senior said, No, we had been insolent to him; we call constable to give evidence, and he said we not insolent; then magistrate say to Mr. Senior. 'You mean insolence by manner.' Massa answer, 'Yes that is what I mean, insolence by manner.' It was the magistrate that put Massa up to say this; then the magistrate sentence us to twenty lashes a-piece.⁵⁸

The petition to the Privy Council discussed several flaws regarding the way that Marie Saladin's case was conducted by the judicial system in Mauritius. Bureaucratic flaws in the court proceedings, such as the influence of Mr. Sefbre and the biased nature of the judges who were all most likely owners or managers of enslaved people, influenced the outcome of the case in a way that would be mutually beneficial for those already in positions of power. The Saladin family's legal representative made several logical arguments in favor of Saladin's contested freedom, attempting to show the court the validity of Saladin's claim to freedom, and the lack of evidence and support which Mr. Sefbre held. As the new agent, Mr. Sefbre was not even present for the agreement or orders from Madame Barillon regarding Saladin's freedom. But the court's interests were not in giving people freedom, but in maintaining the status quo power structure, keeping as many enslaved as possible.

In a similar way, the court proceeding of *Pringle v. Wood* in 1833, regarding Mary Prince's account, also reveals the bias which the legal system had against those who were enslaved or formerly enslaved, and people of color in general. In the legal proceedings which Prince participated in, her testimony was less valued than others. In the *Pringle v. Wood* case, the Woods' attempted to show that Mary Prince is of bad character and therefore could not be trusted in any claims she made in her narrative. They call on the former magistrate of St. John Antigua, Robert Briggs, as witness. Mr. Briggs claimed that Mr. and Mrs. Wood were always

⁵⁸ Williams, *A Narrative of Events*, 2.

mild and gentle to their slaves and that Mary Prince always appeared to be well-dressed and cheerful. However, as the Pringle defense pointed out, the witness, Mr. Briggs, was indicted in 1831 for “a cruelty to his slaves.”⁵⁹ The complaint came from other authorities in Antigua, for misconduct and cruelty to slaves. After being acquitted, Briggs resigned from the position.

Despite Briggs’ apparent misconduct which would typically make a witness seem unsuitable to serve as a credible source of testimony, the Woods still dared to utilize him as a credible witness. It seems perplexing and a bit contradictory that a person called to weigh in on the proper treatment of slaves, had himself mistreated enslaved people. Small inconsistencies and flaws in a case show the greater weight which a white law enforcement officer possessed in the legal and judicial systems as compared to a person of color. It displays the inequity in the law system and the way that enslaved and formerly enslaved persons could be further exploited by a law system that denied them justice by not taking their claims and words seriously. Prince also lacked the access and ability to summon witnesses to testify on her behalf, so she was unable to have any of her statements verified. The individuals which Prince would have summoned would have not been permitted to travel, as they were enslaved, or may have not been able to afford the trip.

It’s not about Money, it’s about Power

Saladin, Prince and Williams, dared to challenge their owners and the larger legal system which kept them oppressed. As a result, the people in positions of power did not respond well to their assertive nature and pursuit of freedom. This struggle between the slave owner and the slave seems to be another theme in accounts from enslaved people, typically related to the

⁵⁹ Prince and Ferguson, *The History of Mary*, 143.

presence and interaction of legal institutions. The slave owners in all three narratives, Mr. Sefbre/ Madame Barillon, Mr. Senior, and Mr. and Mrs. Wood, all had economic motivations for their enslavement of these human beings, but ultimately their actions show a desire to control and have power over their human property.

In the Saladin account, Mr. Sefbre requested additional funds from Saladin due to loss of labor and tax on the estate, based on Saladin and her children's formerly enslaved status. This is just a tool employed by Mr. Sefbre to prolong the case, and to lead the Saladin family back into enslavement, as he probably understood the fee of \$1500 would be impossible for Saladin and her free husband to raise. As Saladin's legal counsel notes: "Madame Barillon could not possibility have any claim to be remunerated for loss of labor... she had no sustained no loss, inasmuch as she had by an express act given up that labor to your petitioner for an indefinite period upon certain conditions."⁶⁰

James Williams' narrative also exhibits this notion of "power over" as the greatest motivator for owners of enslaved people to maintain the existing system of power. Mr. Senior was angered by the fact that he will no longer own his slaves in a few years when the apprentice system ends, and Williams recounts his remarks in the report: "I have heard my master say, 'Those English devils saw we [slaves] to be free, but if we is to be free, he will pretty well weaken we, before the six and four years done; we shall be no use to ourselves afterwards.'"⁶¹ In Prince's account, this notion is reinforced by her owner's repeated refusal to sell her or grant her freedom though manumission, while several other slaves were sold in the same time period. Prince's narrative relates her asking the Woods for her freedom on at least three different

⁶⁰ "Appeal of Marie Saladin", 12.

⁶¹ Williams, *A Narrative of Events*, 2.

occasions, and Prince quizzically states, “She sold five slaves whilst I was with her; but though she was always finding fault with me, she would not part with me....”⁶² Again, the view of property first human being second appears in the actions and remarks of Prince’s owners. This view of enslaved people by owners and those in power reinforce the notion that legal institutions were an inherent site of contradiction, presenting both agency and oppression.

The narrative retellings by Prince, Williams and Saladin, do not follow the typical structure of the Equiano narrative because of their interaction with legal institutions, but still qualify as slave narratives because they recount the experiences of enslaved people of color. These narratives expose another side of the slave experience in nineteenth century Britain, though their format and structure do not follow the same autobiographical model. The next chapter will present yet another way that these narratives expose additional sides of the slave experience, as two come from the point of view of women.

Chapter Four: Enslaved Women’s Portrayal in Legal Institutions

Claiming voice and agency, Mary Prince debunks old mythologies, declines external definitions of slaves and ex-slaves, and clears a path for more open contestations of power in the future.”⁶³

Moira Ferguson

⁶² Prince and Ferguson, *The History of Mary*, 85.

⁶³ Prince and Ferguson, *The History of Mary*, 49.

Descriptions of slave women in accounts written or transcribed by enslaved men typically present the physical violence and sexual exploitation of women from white men in chilling descriptions, noting the way enslaved women were sexualized and mistreated, even while pregnant. These pathos evoking descriptions, though true, leave out much of the story of what it meant to be an enslaved woman in the British Empire in the nineteenth century. In this way these partial descriptions help to reinforce the trope of the sexually exploited slave woman. Without accounts from formerly enslaved women like Mary Prince and Marie Saladin, there would be an even more limited and incomplete view of the ways in which women lived in slave societies and were able to create agency for themselves despite the enslavement, racism and misogyny they faced. The accounts of Mary Prince and Marie Saladin do not deny the sexual harassment and assault described in male accounts from Olaudah Equiano or James Williams. But the accounts by these women, as Moira Ferguson states: “inaugurate[s] a black female counter-offensive against a reductive conception of black women as flogged, half-naked victims of slavery’s entourage.”⁶⁴

The accounts of Prince and Saladin show the ways women advocated for themselves while enslaved, providing us with a richer narrative of slavery and history of women of color in the nineteenth century. They describe cases of sexual assault, but from the perspective of the survivor, which is essential in understanding the power dynamic of the sexual assault of enslaved women. The very fact that the Prince and Saladin accounts appear through the context of legal documents, illustrates the ways which enslaved women asserted themselves in a world dominated by white male voices and perspectives: by representing themselves in legal institutions. Through challenging their status as enslaved persons by contesting their right to

⁶⁴ Ibid, 29.

freedom from their owners and eventually living as free women, Saladin and Prince demonstrate one way enslaved and formerly enslaved women advocated for themselves, a perspective not possible without the interaction of enslaved women with legal institutions, and a crucial aspect of slave narratives. This chapter will examine the ways in which Prince and Saladin provide additional insight into the lives of enslaved women, from the perspective of enslaved women, constantly seeking their freedom and asserting themselves in ways that is not emphasized or even noted in accounts from enslaved men or abolitionists.

Marie Saladin's act of agency revolved around petitioning the courts on behalf of her family and herself to obtain the freedom they were granted from Madame Barillon. Slavery was not a viable option for the Saladin family, and in every appeal to the courts, Saladin and her legal counsel made it clear that her claims for freedom were valid. The first court decision exhibited the hardship of what her family had to go through during the court proceedings, testing their strength. As the petition to the Privy Council noted: "Your petitioner received neither notice of the trial nor of the judgment, nor does it appear by the proceedings that anyone appeared on her behalf in court... the first and only intimation of the decision received by your Petitioner was the forcible entry into the her house of a party of police guards...."⁶⁵ This raid into Saladin's home was ordered by Mr. Sefbre, a judge in Mauritius and the person who would be in direct control of the Saladin family if they were enslaved on the Barillon estate. The ongoing conflict between Mr. Sefbre and Marie Saladin shows another aspect of how enslaved and formerly enslaved women lived their lives within a society which attempted to control their and their children's lives.

⁶⁵ "Appeal of Marie Saladin (a slave) to HM in Council Against a Judgment of the Court of Appeal in Mauritius," 1831, TS 25/17, The National Archives, Public Record, Kew, London, United Kingdom, 3.

Another instance in the Saladin case which illustrates enslaved women's agency was Saladin's purchase of her own daughter. Saladin was forced to act in calculating ways to secure her daughter's freedom and safety when threatened by the first agent of Madame Barillon's estate, Mr. Sacroix. Saladin's account notes that once her daughter was seized by Mr. Sacroix for the purpose of being sold, Saladin appealed to him. Once she was refused:

“Your Petitioner, being incapable as a slave to oppose that cruel measure or to become the purchaser of her child, employed a free man named Christophe to appear as the Buyer, and for that purpose gave him the sum of 300 dollars... accepted by Sacroix as the price of the child, it was by this means restored to its disconsolate parents and made free by Christophe.”⁶⁶

This act of defiance and agency to protect her family was an action which confirms the lengths women could and would go to ensure their family's safety, clearly countering the trope of the passive slave woman presented in other slave narratives. The gamble that Saladin took demonstrates grit and bravery a risk that a mother will take to ensure a child's safety.

In a similar way, Prince narrated her varied attempts to obtain freedom, which she pursued with each owner. She advocated for her freedom by petitioning her owners, and when they refused her, she continued to prepare herself for freedom, by accumulating wealth. While enslaved by the Woods in Antigua she notes, “I did not sit idling during the absence of my owners; for I wanted, by all honest means, to earn money to buy my freedom.”⁶⁷ This discussion of earning one's freedom was a common element in the accounts of Equiano and Williams, who both noted the ways that they saved money to ensure their freedom. This statement coming from

⁶⁶ “Appeal of Marie Saladin”, 1.

⁶⁷ Prince and Ferguson, *The History of Mary*, 81.

a woman's point of view is important in reshaping the larger narrative on the actions of enslaved and formerly enslaved women, creating a larger picture of women of color during slavery. The narratives of Marie Saladin and Mary Prince provide a more expansive definition of what being an enslaved woman was, and provided historians with a richer understanding of the past by defining themselves as individuals as part of and outside of their enslavement and within the legal and judicial system.

Prince's narrative also provides great insight into being married as an enslaved woman. In the account, she discussed the challenges and additional ways which women of color were able to exercise agency in their lives, by taking greater control of their life decisions and starting families. Unlike many slave women represented in narratives, Prince discussed her choice in marrying her husband, Daniel James, on the condition that he became a member of her congregation at the Moravian church. When her owner, Mr. Wood, heard of this he was angered by the fact that she was married to a free man, as she did not ask permission, but possibly because he was aware this may be one step toward her own freedom.

In contrast, accounts of slavery written by enslaved or formerly enslaved men, such as the narratives written by Williams and Equiano promote the trope of the sexually assaulted and exploited slave women, presenting enslaved woman as victims rather than survivors. In his account Equiano stated: "I have seen a negro man staked to the ground, and cut most shockingly, and then his ears cut off bit by bit, because he had been connected with a white woman... as if it were no crime in the whites to rob an innocent African girl of her virtue... the most abandoned woman of her species."⁶⁸ Equiano articulated the many horrors of slavery that he observed

⁶⁸ Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, 77-78.

travelling around the Americas and West Indies, and from his experiences calls enslaved black women, “the most abandoned women of her species.” This cannot possibly be the only insight he gained about enslaved women surviving during slavery.

In the report on apprenticeship, James Williams also spoke about black women’s bodies as objects to white men. In one example he recounted how the guards joked and bragged about seeing slave women naked. Williams also commented often about the ill treatment of women by the guards at the penal workhouses and the overseers on plantations, particularly elderly and pregnant women.

"There was another woman from Drax Hall on the mill- she didn't dance good, and they flog her very much; and when she find the flogging come too hard, she call out, 'Massa, me no one flesh, me two flesh;' she was in family way, but the overseer said he didn't care, it wasn't him giver he belly, and after that they was harder upon her."⁶⁹

These are much different observation from what we see based on the narratives of Mary Prince and Marie Saladin, which show women in desolate and hopeless circumstances, but with a focus on the actions they take to improve their lives.

Mary Prince and Marie Saladin do speak about mistreatment they receive from free white males, which may be linked to their gender and references to sexual assault. Their references are vague, making them more implicit references to the gender based exploitation they endure. This may be because of the target audience of the accounts, who would have been shocked to hear such claims, as it was taboo for women to talk about anything sexual. But Prince’s account does

⁶⁹ James Williams, *A Narrative of Events, since the First of August, 1834, by James Williams, an Apprenticed Labourer in Jamaica*, ed. Diana Paton, *Latin America Otherwise: Languages, Empires, Nations* (n.p.: Duke University Press, 2001), 10.

reference one instance which alludes to some form of sexual harassment, and possible sexual assault from her owner, Mr. D, while she lived on St. Turks Island:

He [Mr. D] had an ugly fashion of stripping himself quite naked and ordering me to then 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.⁷⁰

The nudity related in this situation and the shame she speaks about, could allude to something far more horrific. However, being forced to wash an adult man's body is a valid claim of sexual harassment by today's standards. The violence Prince spoke of when disobeying Mr. D, could also reference a denial to a nonconsensual sexual encounter.

Based on the *Wood v. Pringle* case, we also know that Susanna Strickland, the woman who wrote down Prince's account, failed to include details of Prince's 'relationship' with a man named Captain Abbot, who she had a relationship with while she was enslaved in Antigua by the Wood family. The court record notes: "She [Mary Prince] had lived seven year before with Captain Abbot. She did not live with him, but slept with him sometimes in another hut which she had, in addition to her room in the plaintiff's yard."⁷¹ It is unclear whether or not this relationship was consensual by both Abbot and Prince.

Saladin also implicitly alludes to possible advances for sexual favors, but this really is only an inference made from the court documents. Saladin's legal counsel uses the peculiar term "indulgent consideration" when discussing Mr. Sacroix's response to Saladin's plea to not sell her child. Here is the phrase as it appears in the court document: "That your Petitioner [Marie

⁷⁰ Prince and Ferguson, *The History of Mary*, 77-78.

⁷¹ Prince and Ferguson, *The History of Mary*, 147.

Saladin] represented this fact to Mr. Sacroix, at the same time appealing to his humanity and claiming his indulgent consideration, but Mr. Sacroix, deaf to every remonstrance....”⁷²

The request is never spelled out in the court documents, but based on the wording it evokes the image that Sacroix tried to barter sex or something else from Saladin in exchange for her daughter.⁷³

It is understood that sexual exploitation in relationships between enslaved women and free white men were a reality, but these accounts provide an additional point of view. The accounts from these brazen individuals, show the added hurdles faced based on their gender while enslaved. Their content regarding the daily struggles of enslaved women are integral to history as they shows the sense of agency despite the additional violence enslaved women and women of color faced. Ultimately, these women’s lives illustrate the importance of legal testimonies and accounts being included within the definition of a slave narrative, and the more involved and assertive role enslaved women took under the oppressive system of slavery.

Conclusion

There is an inherent contradiction in slave narratives which interacted with legal representatives and institutions. As an enslaved person, the very telling of one’s story was an act of agency, but also a guarantee to further oppression, as displayed through the cases of Mary Prince, Marie Saladin, and James Williams. Delivering testimony and appearing in court empowered enslaved individuals by creating a space where they had the ability to relate their experiences of enslavement to the wider world: from abolitionists and law makers in Great

⁷² “Appeal of Marie Saladin”, 1.

⁷³ Ibid, 1.

Britain, to the missionaries who continued to travel to the colonies, to colonial magistrates and plantation owners.

But representing oneself in front of and against a legal system which only considered you a human being in certain respects presented great risk. These same law systems that enslaved peoples utilized for agency and action were ultimately a source of subjugation and oppression. The words of people of color and enslaved people were undervalued. The evidence their testimonies provided challenged both slavery as an institution and the rights of their owners who possessed legal power over them. Because of this, the system of power and control present in slave societies like Jamaica, Antigua and Mauritius was further preserved by the legal institutions which enslaved people sought protection from, reinforcing this contradiction of agency and subjugation.

The essential conflict between these two notions of presence in legal institutions as agency and oppression further shows the folly of slavery and the power of the slave narrative as a humanizing and liberating tool. Slave owners and the beneficiaries of slavery viewed Prince, Williams and Saladin only as property. These individuals were often legal officials who served as the final authority in court rulings, the interpretation of slave code, and the matters which were life and death to enslaved people. But their accounts defy this notion of simply being property and call into question both the validity of the institution of slavery. The legal and justice system that would permit such contradictory treatment of human beings also calls into question the legitimacy of British legal institutions in the nineteenth century. In this way, the testimonies of enslaved people have an even larger role within history, exposing larger structural flaws.

The subject of women's portrayal and representation also relates to this contradictory notion of agency and oppression. Enslaved women were exemplified by enslaved men and abolitionists in an attempt to showcase the additional mistreatment enslaved women endured. These one-dimensional depictions were insufficient in encompassing the experience of enslaved women, as exhibited by Prince's and Saladin's narratives which were far more complex than those presented from the perspective of Williams, Equiano and abolitionists. This complexity of narrative also appears in testimony originating from legal disputes between the enslaved and the free. Marie Saladin's case exhibits most vividly the way in which testimonies from enslaved people were not solely the tools of abolitionists or slave owners, as her account exists for sole purpose of personal interest and freedom from slavery. This may be one reason why Saladin's story does not appear yet in scholarly work on the slave narrative.

Recorded slave narratives which intersect with legal institutions often end once the necessary evidence had been collected or with a legal decision, leaving the narrative unfinished. What happened to Mary Prince, James Williams, and Marie Saladin after their slave testimonies and court cases and appeals were heard? It can only be assumed Saladin and her family were placed into slavery once again after losing the appeal in the Privy Council, Williams finished his time as an apprentice in Jamaica and then became free in 1838, and Mary Prince spent the remainder of her life as a free woman in London.

But is this small glimpse into the lives of these enslaved people truly a narrative? The only way that many enslaved people and people of color had their stories presented and transcribed into history was their interaction with legal institutions, so this is often the only portion of their lives we know. Despite seeming incomplete, these narratives are descriptive

records of the enslaved experience in the nineteenth century; their stories are not extraordinary but representative of countless others who were enslaved.

Enslaved people certainly contributed to the ongoing struggle for freedom, not only with written and spoken testimony, but with the various acts of defiance to slavery present in their testimonies. Although these actions were often a futile way of overturning centuries of oppression embedded into the societal structure, they had the potential to change the fate of individual lives. This is the reason why Mary Prince decided to walk out of her owner's London residence, why James Williams decided to tell the world of the horrible terror of the penal workhouses in Jamaica and why Marie Saladin attempted the indirect purchase of her daughter from her owner. These testimonies present tangible evidence of enslaved people's active role in abolition, and enshrine the various ways in which enslaved people advocated for themselves. The stories of Prince, Williams, and Saladin are an invaluable part of the history of nineteenth century.

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