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Narratives of Resistance in the Literary
Archives of Slavery

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The texts discussed in this chapter are ‘narratives of resistance’ to slavery, not only because of the stories they tell, but also because their mere existence is an act of resistance. In the context of eighteenth-century discourse on race, publications in English by writers of African descent were not meant to exist. They were written and printed under a state of interdiction: that is to say, a set of philosophical and political constructs that denied these authors the capacity to write. Yet a diverse group of writers, including Ukawsaw Gronniosaw (1710–1775), Ignatius Sancho (c. 1729–1780), Ottobah Cugoano (b. c. 1757), and Olaudah Equiano (c. 1745–1797), and later Mary Prince (b. c. 1788), presented to the public a complex and varied set of writings. This literary archive includes forms of life-writing – some of which can appear to later generations to be the earliest examples of ‘slave narratives’ – alongside a broad variety of genres including letters and correspondence, poetry, essays, and polemics (see Chapter 4). The ‘Sons of Africa’, as Cugoano was to call the earliest group of male writers, were born in various parts of the Black Atlantic diaspora, and all subsequently claimed the status of British subjects; and although the case of Mary Prince is different, her freedom was also achieved in and through her status in Britain. Faced with a culture of interdiction that denied them the right to speak, their writing and self-narrations were not only a victory of application and personal courage, but also voiced a considerable critique of slavery and its nascent racial system. This chapter begins by exploring the culture of interdiction with regard to the slave and the African in Enlightenment philosophy. It discusses resistance to those arguments by a series of writers in English of African descent, considering each text first as an argument in political history and then also as a work of literary creativity. Narratives of slave resistance in a variety of genres including letters, polemic, and life-writing engage with the political campaigns of abolition and emancipation, with Christian discourse on
human equality, and with the culture of common feeling known as sensibility. The chapter ends by considering the legacy of this archive in black and Asian British fiction of the contemporary period.

**Enlightenment Interdiction of Slave Humanity**

Numerous European Enlightenment *philosophes* denied the intellectual and human equality between Africans and Europeans. David Hume, Thomas Jefferson, Immanuel Kant, Voltaire, James Monboddo, and Henry Home (Lord Kames) are some amongst the many *philosophes* who denied Africans and slaves – sometimes considered together – the same status as humans that they themselves enjoyed. These assertions were important in the emergence of the new conceptual formation or category known as ‘race’ or ‘racism’, even though as conclusions they were wrong and under-researched. The Scottish philosopher Hume is a representative example. In an essay, ‘Of National Characters’, published in 1753, he argued that

> I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences.

In case his point was unclear, he continued: ‘Not to mention our colonies, there are Negro slaves dispersed all over Europe, of which none ever discovered any symptom of ingenuity; tho’ low people, without education, will start up amongst us, and distinguish themselves in every profession.’

Following Hume, Immanuel Kant wrote in 1764 that

> [t]he Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the ridiculous. Mr. Hume challenges anyone to adduce a single example where a Negro has demonstrated talents, and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who have been transported elsewhere from their countries, although very many of them have been set free, nevertheless not a single one has ever been found who has accomplished something greater in art or science or shown any other praiseworthy quality.

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Elsewhere in his moral philosophy, Kant argues that human freedom and equality are at the centre of Enlightenment values, and that these qualities are unalienable aspects of the status of being human. Yet in his comments on the accomplishments of people of African descent, he contradicts himself, and denies this. Kant’s two positions are as historically entwined as they are inconsistent: which is to say, his comments give further evidence that the Enlightenment invented racism in the course of promoting its opposite. George Fredrickson, in *Racism: A Short History*, argues that ‘What makes Western racism so autonomous and conspicuous in world history has been that it developed in a context that presumed human equality of some kind.’³ Fredrickson argues that Enlightenment debate about human equality and autonomy encouraged the development of ideas that rationalised why some other humans were excluded from those conditions. Slavery alone does not produce racism: it needs Enlightenment debate about human equality to encourage race-based rationalisations.

In his claims about the alleged inferiority of people of African descent, Hume gave an example: ‘In Jamaica, indeed, they talk of one negro as a man of parts and learning; but ’tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly.’⁴ Hume, as many contemporary readers knew, referred to Francis Williams, who had been educated in England, perhaps at the University of Cambridge, and was admitted as a member of Lincoln’s Inn in 1721 (the institution in London in which students were trained as lawyers, specifically barristers). He lived most of his life as a free black gentleman in Spanish Town, Jamaica, where he owned considerable property. Evidence of his writing, in the form of neo-Latin verse, was preserved in Edward Long’s *History of Jamaica* (1774), despite Long’s hostility to it and him.⁵ Williams’s erudite and refined poetry, written from the 1730s to the 1760s, clearly vindicated ‘African capacity’ and equality. As this debate established, evidence of intellectual activity and production among people of African descent, especially in the widely disseminated forms of print publication, was both highly compelling and ideologically fraught. In a state of interdiction, the pen and the printing press were significant weapons.

A stream of diverse publications by black Africans in English in the mid-eighteenth century gave eloquent testimony against the philosophes’ prejudiced view. In 1760, Briton Hammon (fl. 1747–1760) related his providential adventures in a pamphlet, A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprizing Deliverance of Briton Hammon, A Negro Man, published in Boston, Massachusetts. Hammon had been cast away in Florida, and then held prisoner in Cuba before he escaped to Jamaica and London. He later returned to the British colony of Boston, where his work was published. In 1773, Phillis Wheatley (1753–1784), a young woman enslaved in Boston, came to London to publish her collection of poems, Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral, with a title-page that clarified that she was ‘negro servant to Mr. John Wheatley, of Boston, in New England’. In 1772, James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw published a spiritual narrative relating the trials of his life: A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince. Born in Bornu in present-day Nigeria, Gronniosaw had been kidnapped on the Gold Coast and sold into slavery in Barbados and, later, New York. The thirty-nine page pamphlet described his spiritual and physical sufferings as a slave and a poor man on the road to Christian salvation and emancipation. The pamphlet had been ‘committed to paper by the elegant pen of a young Lady of the town of Leominster’, and was dedicated to the radical evangelical Christian Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon. Gronniosaw’s pamphlet was a narrative of his life and of ‘God’s wonderful dealings’ with him in allowing him to be saved, both in this world and spiritually.

Although their publications did not address the topic of slavery directly, Hammon, Wheatley, and Gronniosaw gave powerful witness to claims for the moral and intellectual equality of African people with Europeans.

Creativity in a Time of Slavery

The Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African (1782) was the first substantial volume published by a man of African descent. It is a deeply experimental

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6 Briton Hammon, A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings, and Surprizing Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man (Boston, MA: Printed and sold by Green & Russell, in Queen-Street, 1760).
7 Phillis Wheatley, Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral (London: Printed for A. Bell, Bookseller, Aldgate; and sold by Messrs. Cox and Berry, King-Street, Boston, 1773).
8 Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself (Bath: Printed by W. Gye in Westgate-Street; and sold by T. Mills, bookseller, in King’s-Mead-Square, [1772]), iv.

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work. Cast in the form of a series of letters, it celebrated Sancho’s anomalous status as free British gentleman, a grocer of some means, who voted in parliamentary elections for the Westminster electorate, and who took a full and robust part in metropolitan civil society. Sancho’s letter-writing began as a private practice, but came to public knowledge through his correspondence between 1766 and 1768 with Laurence Sterne (1713–1768), author of the comic novel *Tristram Shandy* (1759–1767), which was published subsequently in Sterne’s posthumous *Letters* in 1775. Through Sancho’s intermediation, Sterne wrote a sympathetic, though ambiguous, portrait of the sufferings of African slaves in the Caribbean colonies. Through Sterne’s influence, Sancho adopted the sophisticated and ironic Shandean mode of epistolary writing. Sterne’s style was embedded within the ambitiously egalitarian philosophical programme of sensibility, which reaffirmed that all human creatures, of whatever race, creed, or gender, had the same ability to feel. Emotional equality of experience was expressed in the Shandean mode through a flowing conversational writing style, with punctuation loosely supplied by dashes. This too equated Shandean sentimentalism with liberty and freedom: Sancho’s letter-writing demonstrated, rather than claimed, his status as a free and franchised black British gentleman. However, although it can be argued that Sancho’s chosen writing style, and his quotidian choice of epistolary topics, was an ambitious and creative response to his precarious social position, it has led some recent critics to accuse him of obsequious assimilation. As Sancho said of his own subject position, as both an African former slave and a British citizen and merchant, ‘I am only a lodger – and hardly that.’

Sancho’s *Letters* imparts a strong sense of his self, and provides an intriguing portrait of his status in London as a black British citizen. Nonetheless, the *Letters* is not an autobiography in any conventional sense. He shows he is aware of, and uncomfortable about, his role in retailing sugar and tobacco through his shop in Westminster, products deeply implicated in the colonial system of chattel slave plantations. His hostility to slavery is consistent and clear, even though the *Letters* does not develop or present discussions of or arguments against slavery. In his book, his life was detailed in a biographical preface composed by Joseph Jekyll (1754–1837), a young lawyer and writer. Jekyll’s biography claims that Sancho had been born in 1729 on a slave ship

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sailing from the Guinea coast of West Africa to Cartagena in the Viceroyalty of New Grenada, a Spanish colony in north-west South America (now Colombia), where he was baptised. His parents died while he was an infant, and in 1731, aged two years old, he was brought to England, and while a child served as a slave or servant to a family in Greenwich, London. He escaped their unkind treatment, and the threat of forcible return to slavery in the Caribbean, by becoming a servant to John, second Duke of Montagu (1690–1749). Montagu had already shown his interest in the cause of African learning by his patronage of Francis Williams. Montagu allowed Sancho to receive some education. On Montagu’s death Sancho became butler to Mary, Duchess of Montagu, a position of authority and responsibility in an aristocratic household. In his time working for the Montagus, Sancho was free, or, by being paid, effectively so, although the precise moment of his manumission is obscure. Subsequently, after the death of the Duchess, Sancho was left with a legacy income. He reportedly did some acting, without much success, and became a proficient musician and composer. In 1773, he took up trade as a grocer and merchant with his own family, at No. 20, Charles Street, Westminster. Sancho was well known in London’s literary, musical, and artistic circles: he was a friend of Sterne, David Garrick, and the painter John Hamilton Mortimer, as well as Richard Payne Knight (the poet-aesthete stician), John Ireland (a painter and Hogarth’s biographer), and Joseph Nollekens (the sculptor). Gainsborough painted his portrait. The publication of his letters reflected this celebrity.

Life-Writing Against Slavery: Cugoano and Equiano

Ottobah Cugoano and Olaudah Equiano wrote and were published in the context of the campaign for the abolition of the slave trade. Both their writing projects were, in whole or part, autobiographical, resting on the argument that their lives were a testimony against slavery. Cugoano’s *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1787) is a trenchant polemic on the moral cost of slavery, not only to slaves but also to slave-owners. Cugoano argues that the slavery of the Africans in the Caribbean should be abolished, including but not limited to the trade in slaves from Africa. Cugoano makes this argument as

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a Christian, and a man of ‘enlightened understanding’, as must ‘every man that has claim or affinity to the name of Christian’. For someone to ignore his argument, he concludes, would be to ‘resign their own claim to any degree of sensibility and humanity, for that of barbarians and ruffians’. His analysis of the politics of slavery is rigorous, and as he says, the consequences are harsh. His argument exploits the inconsistency between the British political identity that supported both slave-owning in British colonies and the civilising mission of Christian faith: for as he argues, if Christians were to truly apply the teachings of their faith to themselves, without hypocrisy or double standards, they would not tolerate slavery, in either its moral or practical dimension. At the end of his book, after many compelling lessons against slavery and slave-owners (whom he repeatedly denigrates as thieves, ‘robbers of men’, and kidnappers), Cugoano calls explicitly for the destruction of the slave trade and proposes the global emancipation of slaves, to be enforced by the redeployment of the British navy. Slave-owners, he goes on, should be punished by being made the slaves of those they have enslaved. This forceful view made Cugoano the most radical African British voice in the eighteenth century.

Cugoano’s *Thoughts and Sentiments* is a trenchant and angry prose narrative addressed to a metropolitan audience. Henry Louis Gates, Jr argues, in *Figures in Black* (1987), that the typical condition of the written utterance of the ex-slave was that it ‘was written or published for an essentially hostile auditor or interlocutor, the white abolitionist or the white slaveholder’. This was certainly the case with Cugoano, who addresses his political opponents directly. In literary form, his book has been likened to a jeremiad, a form of religious protest writing, common in the Protestant Dissenting tradition, which presents a list of woes or complaints. Cugoano, also known as John Stuart or Stewart, situates himself within the burgeoning abolitionist discourse of the 1780s written against chattel slavery (especially as it was practised in the Americas) and the slave trade (the commerce in slaves between Africa and the Americas). This discourse was notably Christian: Cugoano’s biblical rhetoric and phrasing, together with his frequent quotation of scripture, underline his location within abolitionist circles. The book begins with an introductory statement testifying to Cugoano’s African status and his right to speak on the topic. ‘To a man of my complexion’, he says, ‘it cannot but be very discouraging’ to meet with men, like Hume and Long,

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who argue that ‘an African is not entitled to any competent degree of knowledge, or capable of imbibing any sentiments of probity’. Cugoano finds his voice by explicitly opposing the Enlightenment interdiction of slave humanity. His voice is reinforced by a short narrative account of his early life, explaining how he was snatched away from his native country, kidnapped, and trafficked to America. Life narrative, Cugoano discovered, was a rhetorically powerful testimonial to his subsequent arguments about slavery (although modern readers, habituated to the conventions of the nineteenth-century slave narrative, have sometimes been disappointed by the comparative brevity of this autobiographical section). He relates that he was a Fanti, born in Agimaque in present-day Ghana, in 1757. Aged thirteen he was sold into slavery and transported to the island of Grenada in the Caribbean, a British sugar colony captured from the French in 1763, where he was forced to work on a sugar plantation for more than a year. Although his truncated slavery narrative notes some of the horrors of slavery he witnessed in Grenada, Cugoano does not dwell on them, nor, for that matter, his passage to literacy, his conversion, or his eventual emancipation. In 1772, he was purchased by Alexander Campbell, an English merchant, and brought to England, where he taught himself to read and write. There he apparently took advantage of the legal ruling against slavery by Lord Mansfield in the Somerset case (1772), which established that chattel slavery was not supported by English common law, though it was tolerated in other English jurisdictions. So while the decision did not affect slaves in the American colonies, it clarified that a person could not be removed from England back to a slave-owning jurisdiction against his or her will. As such, the judgment was widely interpreted as establishing that all slaves present in England were free. Cugoano celebrated the case in the second edition of the *Thoughts and Sentiments*. As a free man in Britain, Cugoano was employed, for wages, as a servant, working from 1784 for the artists Richard and Maria Cosway. Through their circles he met a wide range of artists and politicians active in London at the time. He may have met Sancho before the latter’s death in 1780, and certainly came into contact with Equiano. In 1786 they joined forces with Granville Sharp to defend the case of Henry Demane, an African who was threatened with forcible return to the slave-owning territories of the Caribbean. Self-styled the ‘Sons of Africa’, they continued their struggles against slavery through letters to newspapers and public meetings. *Thoughts and Sentiments*

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15 Ibid., 115–16.
was a contribution to this political campaign. In 1791 Cugoano published a shortened version of his account, with some additional material, in which he proposed opening a school to advance the education of black British children.

The full potential of life-writing as testimony against slavery and the slave trade was explored by Olaudah Equiano two years later. The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself was first published in 1789 in London in two volumes, with an illustrated portrait frontispiece. This was a remarkably successful publication, with nine British editions published during Equiano’s lifetime, further editions in the United States, and translations into Dutch, German, and Russian by 1794. His book was ‘printed and sold for the Author’, meaning he took all the risk and made all the profit for the publication, while a bookseller, John Murray of Fleet Street in London, simply contracted for the printing of the volumes. The book was accompanied by a list of 311 ‘subscribers’ in the first edition, supporters of his work who had agreed to its purchase before publication. Equiano assiduously promoted the book, its sales, and his argument, through extensive lecture tours around the British Isles in the 1790s (see Chapter 4). All this was a major achievement.

In the text, Equiano’s Interesting Narrative described itself variously as a life, a memoir, and a history. The title-page insisted on its status as autobiography with the phrase ‘Written by Himself’, though it gives the writer two names, Gustavus Vassa and Olaudah Equiano. In genre, the book is a creative response to a form of life-writing well established in the eighteenth century: the spiritual autobiography. This was a kind of prose biography, especially popular in Protestant writing from the mid-seventeenth century to the nineteenth century, which offered an account of a believer as he or she moves from a state of sinfulness to one of salvation and grace, typically through a repeating pattern in which recognition of sin leads to repentance, before renewed doubt ends in a fall into sin again. To the conventions of the spiritual autobiography, Equiano added a considerable repertoire of literary tools, successfully enhancing the narrative’s value and power as rhetoric and entertainment. His book recalls, and has learned from, the narrative techniques of eighteenth-century travel writing and adventure stories, including prose fictions in the Defoe tradition that describe the trials of a self-made

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identity. It also borrows from other forms of self-writing, including the captivity narrative and apologia, and includes sections more familiar from moral philosophy and economic tracts. This polyvocal discourse helps to make Equiano’s narrative the most readable and compelling account of slavery written in the period. That it was presented as if written by an eyewitness with personal experience of the state of slavery makes it doubly significant.

Equiano’s narrative of himself explicitly served the political agenda of the nascent abolitionist movement, whose aim was the suppression of the Atlantic slave trade and eventually the abolition of slavery itself. Equiano’s life served as testimony to that campaign: he wrote to expose the horrors and inequalities of slavery. The Interesting Narrative details that he was born an Igbo, in a village called Essaka in modern-day Nigeria. He paints a positive, even idyllic, image of his early life in Africa, before he and his sister were kidnapped into slavery to be sold to European slave-traders on the seacoast. He offers a historically significant account of the middle passage and the horrors he witnessed while a slave, first in Barbados and then in Virginia. Recent historical research has complicated this account: Vincent Carretta notes documentary evidence that suggests he was born in South Carolina in North America, and parts of Equiano’s account of Africa borrow scenes and ideas from previous travel writing, notably Anthony Benezet’s Some Historical Account of Guinea (1788). The fictionalised elements of his autobiography arguably show how important it was for Equiano that his writing would make a clear and significant contribution to the political cause of the anti-slavery movement. To this end, his narrative provides an account of life as a slave, and also relates how he learned to read and write, and tell accounts, key skills that transformed his slave life. It also details his conversion to Christianity, and his eventual manumission. This he achieved in 1767 by saving enough money to buy himself out of slavery, under conditions imposed on him by his then owner Robert King, a Quaker merchant from Philadelphia. As a free man, Equiano was employed as a sailor and served in a Royal Navy expedition to the Arctic in 1773, before settling in London in the early 1780s, where his political career in abolitionist circles began. He was actively engaged with the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, founded in 1787 by Thomas Clarkson and Granville Sharp. His autobiography was a document planned to be of use to this cause: ‘I now offer this

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edition of my Narrative to the candid reader, and to the friends of humanity, hoping it may still be the means, in its measure, of showing the enormous cruelties practiced on my sable brethren, and strengthening the generous emulation now prevailing in this country, to put a speedy end to a traffic both cruel and unjust.  

Women and the Slave Narrative: Mary Prince

The early writings of black British writers provided eloquent testimony against the Enlightenment culture of racialised interdiction. The writings were, further, a significant contribution to the political campaign against the trade in slaves, broadly successful in Britain by 1807, and for the emancipation of slaves in British colonies in 1834. The campaigns and these texts provided significant impetus for the publication of *The History of Mary Prince* in 1831, the first narrative of a black woman and former slave published in Britain.  

Prince was a woman of about forty years of age, who had endured very harsh treatment as a slave in Bermuda before being brought to London in 1828. There, as she tried to escape her status as a slave, she had appealed for assistance at the Anti-Slavery Society in Aldermanbury, in the heart of the City of London. The help she required was legal and monetary, and centred on her attempts to escape the state of slavery by avoiding the threat of forcible return to slavery in the Caribbean. Thomas Pringle, the secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society, gave her legal advice, arranged for the relief of her debts, and helped her find paid employment, as he detailed in his ‘Supplement’ to the text.  

The Anti-Slavery Society also agreed to support her case by assisting her to publish an account of her life, an idea ‘first suggested by herself’. *The History of Mary Prince* is a self-told biography, for although she could read and write, Prince dictated her narrative to Susanna Strickland (1803–1885). Her amanuensis was an accomplished writer of books for children, who later, having moved to Canada, found some literary fame with her memoirs of pioneer life. To some extent, it is a spoken-word biography frozen in text, the oral dimension periodically reasserting itself. In the preface, Pringle explains how Prince’s story was dictated to Strickland, who wrote out a full transcript, with ‘all the narrator’s repetitions and prolixities’. Pringle as editor reshaped the

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narrative for publication, cutting or ‘pruning’ extraneous material, but keep-
ing ‘Mary’s exact expressions and peculiar phraseology’.23 Mary’s vocal
idiosyncrasies occasionally disturb the smooth and confident flow of the
late Regency prose. An example is her characteristic repetitions of key
phrases: the triplet ‘work – work – work’ is repeated three times, and echoed
in the Blakean ‘weep, weep, weep’.24 The account ends too with a call for
emancipation, addressed to the King of England, calling for ‘all the poor
blacks be free, and slavery done up evermore’.25 Although Pringle claimed
‘no fact of importance has been omitted’, he had cut away key aspects of her
experience. Some of the omissions were revisited in the press after the text
was published. The book had of course been intended to publicise the anti-
slavery cause, and deep concern was raised by the awfulness of her experi-
ence, especially the extent to which Prince was repeatedly treated with
cruelty and violence by unfeeling white slave-owners. But other readers
were more hostile. James MacQueen, a former plantation overseer and anti-
abolitionist campaigner, cast doubt on Prince’s account in Blackwood’s
Edinburgh Magazine, accusing the abolitionists of exaggerating the suffering
of the slaves, and making damaging ad hominem attacks on Mary Prince’s
character.26 Thomas Pringle sued Thomas Cadell, the London publisher of
Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine, but was then countersued for libel himself.
Prince gave evidence at Pringle’s libel trial, providing further verification of
her life story, but also revealing that her past was more complicated than her
History had suggested. For legal reasons, and to respect religious scruples, key
aspects of Prince’s experience, especially around her experience of sexual
abuse, were left unsaid in her narrative. In the cultural climate of the period,
those events, and their omission from her story, lessened the value of her
testimony. After three editions in its first year, The History of Mary Prince was
all but forgotten until the feminist literary historian Moira Ferguson pro-
duced an edition for a trade paperback imprint in 1987.27

Prince’s account of her suffering at the hands of the slave-owners works to
personalise and sentimentalise the relation of slavery: she wants the reader to
feel the trials of her experience along with her, exploiting the power of
empathy. Like Sancho, Cugoano, and Equiano, her writing serves

24 History of Mary Prince, ed. Salih, 20, 21, 38, 16. 25 Ibid., 38.
26 James MacQueen, ‘The Colonial Empire of Great Britain’, Blackwood’s Edinburgh
27 The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave; Related by Herself, ed. Moira Ferguson
(London: Pandora, 1987).
a polemic purpose. But the earlier male writers of the 1770s and 1780s were intent on establishing an intellectual equality, as co-religionists, cultural producers, and fellow citizens, with their implied British reader, as a way to counter the Enlightenment interdiction of African arts and letters. Mary Prince, by contrast, seeks, through a detailed account of her suffering, to demonstrate the emotional or sentimental equality she shared with her fellow Christians in England, using the commonality of feeling to beseech them for assistance in the wider struggle for emancipation.

The middle section of Prince’s biography offers a series of scenes exposing the cruelties of slavery, developing a contrast between slave sensibility and the morally hardened depravity of the slave-owner. She shows how, on the one hand, the slave system harshly objectifies the slave body, which is simply a machine from which labour is extracted through the application of violence; on the other, the narrator reiterates that the slave body is a feeling body, subject to extended and extreme suffering, manifested through pain and tears. Her status as a woman underlines her capacity for feeling and suffering. The repeated scenes of weeping and tenderness, which some readers may now find mawkish, were a highly successful strategy in the literary culture of the period. Prince argues that the English slave-owners of Antigua have been corrupted by the slave system: ‘Slavery hardens white people’s hearts towards the blacks.’ Prince explains that in this morally-depraved condition, slave-owners can see slaves only as objects and commodities. When she was sold at a slave auction, Prince explains, the ‘vendue master’ who conducted the auction offered her ‘for sale like sheep, or cattle’.28 Prince’s narrative contrasts hard-hearted slavery and the shared humanity of feeling. In the cruel commercial logic of the slave-owner, the only motive is to extract the maximum amount of labour from the slaves, whatever the cost to their body and mind. Prince locates this commercial impulse behind the slave-owner’s willingness to use, and perverse preference for, extreme violence meted out to the slave body. Against this, she describes the slave’s capacity for feeling: the awful experience of the slave system leads the slave to feel more, to have more sensibility. This re-establishes a claim to humanity and the equality of experience between colonial slave and metropolitan subject. Prince expostulates:

Oh the horrors of slavery! – How the thought of it pains my heart! But the truth ought to be told of it; and what my eyes have seen I think it is my duty to relate; for few people in England know what slavery is. I have been

28 History of Mary Prince, ed. Salih, 11.
a slave – I have felt what a slave feels, and I know what a slave knows: and I would have all the good people in England to know it too, that they may break our chains, and set us free.

The first-person testimony about feeling slavery is offered as encouragement to activism. As Mary Prince says twice in the book, ‘To be free is very sweet.’

Conclusion: Historical Fiction in the Archive of Slavery

The archive of eighteenth-century black British writing about the experience of slavery in Africa and the Caribbean became the subject for renewed historical enquiry in the late twentieth century. In the 1980s and 1990s, a group of scholars, notably including Paul Edwards and Vincent Carretta, undertook research into eighteenth-century black British writers and their publications, producing critical editions of all the major works. David Dabydeen’s *Hogarth’s Blacks* (1985), which detailed the extensive presence of black figures in eighteenth-century British painting, performed similar work in the discipline of art history. These historical and editorial projects advertised and analysed the struggle undertaken by writers to overturn the culture of interdiction and encode their resistance to slavery. In their turn, this archive of narratives served as a significant resource for an extraordinary series of historical novels which appeared in the 1990s. Caryl Phillips’s *Crossing the River* (1993) engages with Equiano’s depiction of a bucolic African childhood, as the narrator reveals how he was forced to sell his children into slavery when his crops failed. Fred D’Aguiar’s *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997) novelises the history of the Zong slave-ship massacre, relating the story of a slave who survives being thrown overboard. Slave experience of life on an eighteenth-century Caribbean sugar plantation informs further historical novels, such as Phillips’s *Cambridge* (1991). David Dabydeen’s *A Harlot’s Progress* (1999) takes the black servant figure from William Hogarth’s eponymous visual satire and traces a complicated history for him between Africa and Britain, and slavery and freedom. S. I. Martin’s *Incomparable World* (1996) reimagines the experience of a community of former slaves, black Loyalist soldiers evacuated from North America after the rebellion of the slave-owners in 1776, living in London in the eighteenth

century, including not always flattering portraits of Sancho, Cugoano, and Equiano. Drawing on the archives of black history, and the narratives of resistance encoded there, these works, both scholarly and fictional, provide a partial answer to Cugoano’s lament, at the end of his *Thoughts and Sentiments*, that ‘what I have said may appear as the rattling leaves of autumn, that may soon be blown away and whirled in a vortex where few can hear and know’.  

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