Mary Prince, *History of Mary Prince*

“What cannot be fully restored:” Some thoughts on what it means to bear injuries for which there is no restoration, no recompense:

Amid an ocean of silences and silencings, and when, over four centuries, millions of souls have drowned at the hands of the slavers, Mary Prince speaks . . . and is heard, her text an instant success in Britain, helping to push the nation towards the abolition of slavery. But it is important to remember that her text is itself characterized by certain silences, things left unsaid and unsayable.

For example, we know from the depositions that Prince was compelled to make in the two libel trials--stemming from the publication of her autobiography--that she had other sexual partners, both black and white men. Her relationship with one of those men in fact led to her leaving the Moravian Society. These and other details are missing from her *History*. As the noted feminist historian, Moira Ferguson, argues, Prince (no doubt with the approval of Thomas Pringle and the Anti-Slavery Society), shapes her story in this way “in order to foster the impression that she is pure, Christian, and innocent” (p. 74, note 26). Prince, in other words, tells a story of her own life that fits the expectations of her white readers, many of whom might well look for any excuse to ignore what she says about the horrors of chattel slavery. Could a black woman with an unmarried sex life be trusted? Mary Wollstonecraft’s great revolutionary feminist work, *Vindications of the Rights of Woman* (1791), although initially well-received, was dismissed when, after her death, her husband revealed that she had had several relationships with men, including one with a married man. So, leaving out these sorts of details helps Prince propel the forward arc of her story of a person who endured the degradations of the shadow of the valley of death but who, armed with her Christian faith, and “pure” of mind and body, survived and triumphed. Now, there is no gainsaying the importance of that faith or the impact that it had on her life—like many others worldwide, she found strength and solace in her religious community living in a white supremacist culture that did everything it could to deny her community. As she points out, albeit a bit tentatively, looking back on her life she can see how the hand of God was present and shielding her from death even and especially when she didn’t yet realize that fact. “I was mercifully preserved for better things” (16), she says.

But there are other silences and omissions in this text whose source is something else again, and that have nothing to do with an attempt to mollify the prudish worries of white people. There are moments when it seems clear that Prince cannot put some of her traumatic experiences and those of other enslaved persons into words. Return to the pages in which Prince tells the story of Hetty, tortured and murdered by Mr. I. Hetty is pregnant—no doubt by her enslaver, the same man responsible for her death and the death of her unborn child. As many scholars have pointed out, the sexual assault of enslaved women was epidemic—not an exception in the plantation economies but a systematic imposed instrument of terror and control. Recent analyses have demonstrated that assaults were so widespread that they left a kind of genetic trace in black populations. We get only a hint of that violence here in a part of the book that is otherwise gruesomely graphic in the details that it provides about Mr. I’s treatment of those he has enslaved. Prince’s remarks are revealing: “I could not bear to think about it; yet it was always present to my mind for many a day” (16).

Consider these remarks carefully, *sitting* with them: what has taken place, the torture and murder of Hetty and her child, cannot be thought*; yet what took place remains present in her mind*. The violence she witnesses can and is described up to a point—that why we have the pages that we have. But there is something so wounding, so traumatic about what happened (and it is important to remember that violence like this was happening every day, everywhere there were plantations), that it in effect falls out of thought, as if lodged in the body but inexpressible. Prince is giving us a language to name experiences for which there may not be words or even thoughts, perhaps not unlike the scars she bears and that bear mute testament when there are no words. Traumatic experiences act like this form an embodied undertow in this text, a force that complicates and impedes the forward momentum of the autobiographical narrative, the story that goes: "I suffered but I endured, the proof of which is that I can now look back and narrate my life as if it had a forward impetus from a condition of suffering to survival." That story is true; but so is the story of how Prince lived a life of constant interruptions, constantly being forced to adapt and adapt again to new, awful conditions. As she herself says twice—where?—her life was sometimes not an upward arc to freedom but a horizontal or lateral shuffling between sadists.

That's why, in my recorded lecture, I ask you to sit with the passage near the text's conclusion in which Prince declares that "I still live in the hope that God will find a way to give me liberty, and give me back to my husband. I endeavour to keep down my fretting, and to leave all to Him, for he knows what is good for me better than I know myself. Yet, I must confess, I find it a hard and heavy task to do so" (37). What a moving and difficult moment this is in Prince's *History*. Prince declares her faith in God, and thus her belief that wrongs will be righted, but she also points out that God's hand in her life has yet to show itself in two fundamental ways: she doesn't yet have "liberty," meaning that although she is technically not an enslaved person while she stands on British soil, she is still vulnerable to being re-enslaved if she returns to the Caribbean; moreover, she remains separated from her husband, the latest is a series of wounding separations that began with her being torn away from her mother at a slave auction in Bermuda. Prince frankly admits that under these conditions, it is very hard to remain devout. Perhaps the most robust kind of faith is one that is a scene of struggle rather than comfortable assurance. As powerful as her Christian faith is, she carries within herself traumatic experiences that faith may not be able to heal or rectify or for that matter be interested in healing or rectifying. In a sense, she is saying to us that although I am in Britain, I carry forever carry in my body what took place in the Caribbean. I have asserted myself, proclaimed myself to be an "I" in a world that has insisted I am merely property . . . . but I also bear scars that are permanent. As I said in my recorded lecture, this experience was certainly not unknown among enslaved and formerly enslaved persons. Ottobah Cugoano, an African born man sold into slavery as a boy, a man who emancipated himself and wrote an early, widely read book denouncing slavery and the slave trade, pointed out as early as 1787 that while slavery would one day be abolished what would never be abolished were the deep wounds inflicted upon black folk by slavery. Abolishing slavery he says, looking ahead to what will not happen for almost half a century, is a "just commutation," i.e., a legal remedy to the problem. But the trauma, the deep and unhealable wound cutting through human history that is chattel slavery, is, as he says so memorably, ***what cannot be fully restored***. What does that mean? In what ways does Prince's text capture what it means to live with a trauma—hers and those around her--that cannot be spirited away? It is interesting to consider that Cugoano was a devout Christian: his book, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery*, is much more thickly Christian than Prince's *History*, whose

references to her faith, while important, are relatively sparse. Cugoano looks forward to the day when the slavers and their accomplices face God's wrath. But he insists that while the wicked will be judged, there is no way to erase "the injuries already done to the enslaved." In both Prince and Cugoano, those injuries are carried forward into the present and future, ineradicable, calling out to be seen for what they are. A world without slavery is a world that must sit with trauma. Perhaps that is what bearing witness is: the practice of tarrying with the wounds of others, the response to the demand to be present to woundedness and suffering of others, so as to take collective responsibility for the future. To bear witness is to face the reality of what cannot be fully restored.