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# Representations of Labor in the Slave Narrative

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# REPRESENTATIONS OF LABOR IN THE SLAVE NARRATIVE

by

AGNEL BARRON

Under the Direction of Carol Marsh-Lockett

## ABSTRACT

This study examines the slave narratives *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself* and *The Bondswoman's Narrative* to determine the way in which these texts depict the economics of labor in slave society. Taking into account the specific socio-historical contexts in which these narratives were written, this study analyzes the way in which the representations of labor in these narratives interrogate slavery and address issues relating to the social relations and power dynamics of their respective societies. Emphasis is given to the way in which the gender complexities of slavery merge with the dynamics of labor thereby underscoring some of the peculiarities of the female slave experience.

**INDEX WORDS:** Slave narratives, Olaudah Equiano, Mary Prince, The Bondswoman Narrative, Labor, Slave society, Representations of labor, Slavery, Social relations, Power dynamics, Gender complexities, Dynamics of labor, Female slave experience

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## INTRODUCTION

The anti-slavery writings of slaves and former slaves that both chronicled the horrors of slavery and called for the abolition of slavery are invariably tied to economics both in terms of their subject matter and the purposes for which they were created. Thematically, the delineation of slavery highlights, both implicitly and explicitly, the fact that slavery was first and foremost an economic system which became tied to racial slavery. That the abolition of the slave trade in both Britain and the United States was intricately connected to the economic systems of these two societies is borne out by the historical evidence in the works of writers such as Eric Williams, Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan. In their work, *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas*, Berlin and Morgan note that labor was both the reason for enslavement and the means by which the enslaved could gain their freedom. According to these writers, the slave's labor was the basis upon which all relations in slave society rested; hence understanding labor relations between master and slave is crucial to understanding slave society (2).

In spite of this fact, however, much of the criticism on slave narratives focuses overwhelmingly on the analysis of their portrayal of the human relationships that were informed by the racism that was endemic to slave society. This has resulted in a tendency to ignore the fact that these narratives often subtextually interrogate the economic system which this institutionalized racism supported to reveal that these relationships were conditioned by the relentless drive of those who owned the means of production to accumulate wealth. This view that the economic significance of slavery is often ignored in favor of the humanistic aspect is given credence by noted Caribbean historian Eric Williams, who in his seminal work *Capitalism*

*and Slavery* maintains that the humanistic bend of modern historical discourse has caused historians to downplay or ignore the economic factors that led to the abolition of slavery (210).

As physical entities, slave narratives were not merely literary enterprises, they were also commercial ventures undertaken by their writers with the hope of making a profit and improving their economic condition. Yet these narratives are often viewed less as commodities that were intended to serve very practical functions and more as aesthetic creations that were designed to validate the humanity of their writers and the enslaved group which they represented. This point is underscored by Ross J. Pudaloff, who, in discussing *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, notes that there is a tendency of Western discourse to separate “the economic and the aesthetic” with the result that the economic aspects of Equiano’s narrative are subordinated to the aesthetic elements (504). Although Pudaloff is referring specifically to Equiano’s work, his comments can be applied to the treatment which the genre of the slave narrative has received in general.

Thus while it is important not to obscure the role that racism played in slavery – a point made by George M. Fredrickson who cautions that an overly relentless pursuit of class analysis of slavery would “[underplay] the historical significance of racism,” (4) – it is also of equal importance to fully analyze the economic aspect of slavery as it manifests itself in the works of former slaves who advocated an end to slavery through their writings. This is my rationale for undertaking this thesis. I believe that it is important to explore the commercial aspects of slave narratives which themselves were not only artistic creations but also functioned as commodities. As such, they participated in the marketplace created by an economic system based on slavery even as they critiqued the slave’s exclusion from this system. Such an examination makes it clear that these narratives not only argue for the social and cultural equality of the enslaved but

also highlight the need for economic equality through their delineation of the ways in which racism and economic exploitation commingled under slavery. Given the centrality of labor to the slave's life and to the economic system which this labor supported, I believe that greater insight into the economic aspects of slave narratives can be gained by examining the thematic portrayal of labor in these narratives. Fredrickson acknowledges the centrality of labor relations to slave society as he notes that the rise of neo-Marxian "class analysis ... has drawn attention to the fact that slavery was preeminently a labor system and that its abolition required a massive readjustment of the relations between workers and those who owned the means of production" (3-4).

I therefore analyze *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself* and *The Bondswoman's Narrative* to determine how these slave narratives depict what Houston A. Baker refers to as the "economics of labor" in slave society. Taking into account the specific socio-historical contexts in which these narratives were written, I analyze the way in which the representations of labor in these narratives interrogate slavery and address issues relating to the social relations and power dynamics of their respective societies. I also analyze the manner in which the gender complexities of slavery merge with the dynamics of labor thereby underscoring some of the peculiarities of the female slave experience.

In the first chapter, I review the literature on these three narratives. I focus on the criticisms of Equiano's narrative that examine the economic aspects of his work together with the extant criticism on *Mary Prince* and *The Bondswoman's Narrative*. These two narratives have received far less critical attention than Equiano's narrative. Much of the literature on *Mary Prince* focuses on issues related to voice and the portrayal of the body in the narrative. The

economic aspects of the text have been mentioned in passing but have not received sustained treatment. Much of the criticism on *The Bondwoman's Narrative* centers on the authenticity of the narrative, the author's use of Gothic elements and the ways in which she draws on and borrows from the literary traditions of her era. There is little to no criticism that examines the text's treatment of the economics of labor as it occurs under slavery.

Equiano's narrative, one of the earliest and most influential of the slave narratives, is seen as a seminal text that helped to usher in the genre of the slave narrative. A combination of "spiritual autobiography, captivity narrative, travel book, adventure tale, narrative of slavery, economic treatise, *apologia*, and perhaps historical fiction, among other things" (Carretta xxvii), Equiano's text was first published in Britain in 1789, and was succeeded by eight other editions in his lifetime, with the last edition published in 1794. Set in Africa, England, the West Indies and the United States, Equiano's autobiographical narrative is truly transnational. As Vincent Carretta argues, Equiano comes across as a cosmopolitan man of the Atlantic world and indeed as "a citizen of the world" (*Equiano, The African* xix). Of the three narratives that I will analyze, Equiano's has received the most critical attention. Houston A. Baker, for example, uses Equiano's narrative as a touchstone to prove his contention that "under ideological analysis certain recurrent, discursive patterns suggest a unified economic grounding for Afro-American narratives" (39). He then analyzes Equiano's text to illustrate the way in which the economic sub-text of the narrative is borne out. Other critics, such as Carl Plasa and Ross J. Pudaloff, read Equiano as one who resists and challenges the dominant discourse while others such as Tanya Caldwell and Frank Kelleter view him as one who internalizes the discourse of British imperialism and seeks to promote it through his writing.

While Equiano's narrative has received some critical treatment in terms of its representation of labor and economics, I believe that Equiano's attempt to economically reconcile African and British culture is in need of further analysis. This attempt at reconciliation is underscored in his proposition that Africa engage in trade with Britain. In chapter 2, I examine this argument paying particular attention to elements of Equiano's thought that can be related to the philosophy of Hegel. While critics have discussed aspects of Equiano's thought that conform to the Enlightenment discourse that characterized his socio-historical context, the elements of Equiano's worldview that reflect Hegelian logic have not been explored. I, therefore, explore the ways in which Equiano can be said to conform to this masculinist discourse as outlined in Hegel's philosophy that privileges rationality, knowledge and capitalism. I also examine Equiano's economic argument in relation to his cosmopolitanism which he combines with his economic autonomy to create an identity that resists the dehumanization of slavery.

I then compare the narratives of Prince and Crafts in relation to Equiano's text to show that the economics of slavery in the female slave narrative differs from that of the male narrative. In contrast to Equiano's narrative that only offers fleeting glimpses into the female slave experience, *Mary Prince* and *The Bondwoman's Narrative* reveal the ways in which the institutions of womanhood, marriage, motherhood and the family were denigrated under a system of capitalist, racist, patriarchal oppression. I begin Chapter 3 by analyzing the circumstances surrounding the production of Prince's narrative to show that her "voice" was controlled by others. Unlike *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* that was written by Equiano, Prince's limited literacy forced her to narrate her story to Thomas Pringle, the then secretary of the Anti-slavery Society of Great Britain. Probably due to censorship, her

narrative focuses overwhelmingly on her work as a slave to the almost total exclusion of her personal life, yet there is enough coded information to deduce certain omitted details pertaining to her personal life. I use Baker's theory of the economics of slavery in conjunction with gendered readings of Prince's narrative to discuss the muted maternity and sexuality of the narrative and the ideal of "true womanhood" that informs the narrative. In an article entitled "When the Subaltern Travels: Slave Narrative and Testimonial Erasure in the Contact Zone," Mario Cesareo asserts that maternity and sexuality are underplayed in Prince's narrative. Referring to this as the narrative's "libidinal economy," he notes that Prince conforms to rather than subverts the Puritan discourse of the society in which her text was produced (114). Sandra Pouchet Paquet also notes that Prince is held to and judged by the "Victorian ideal of true womanhood," which placed emphasis on the bodies of female slave narrators who, in spite of the denigration that they faced under slavery, were still held to the unrealistic ideals of true womanhood (137). One result of the influence of the cult of true womanhood is evinced in the use of elements of the sentimental genre within Prince's narrative. These elements are combined with other genres resulting in a hybridized narrative (Ferguson 24-25). In addition to exploring the ways that gender expectations influenced Prince's narrative, I also focus on the strategies of resistance which she devised in an effort to not only secure her freedom but also to construct an identity that was independent of the dominant discourses that sought to subjugate her. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the narrator's cosmopolitan consciousness as it relates not only to race but also to class.

In Chapter 4, I analyze *The Bondwoman's Narrative*. Thought to have been written in the 1860s, it is the most structurally complex of the three narratives. An American slave narrative that was unearthed by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in 2002, its authorship is still a subject of

debate. Unlike the narratives of Olaudah Equiano and Mary Prince, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* was not published at the time it was written, and there is still dispute as to whether it is based on the true life experiences of its purported author, Hannah Crafts, or whether it is a fictitious account of a slave's life rendered in the genre of the autobiography. It also differs from the other two narratives in that the principal character, Hannah Crafts, is a mixed race domestic slave, who in comparison to her fellow slaves enjoys a life of relative privilege as a lady's maid. In his introduction to this narrative, Gates notes that "though other mixed-race narrators, such as Harriet Wilson or Harriet Jacobs, stress industry and hard work, none makes it a fetish the way that Crafts does" (lxvii). I explore the reasons why these traits are "fetishized" as they are in this narrative.

Drawing on Baker's analysis of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, in which he examines the ways in which the economics of slavery becomes gendered in the female slave narrative, I explore possible reasons why the author "fetishizes" industry and hard work to the extent that she does. Using Baker's theory of the economics of slavery in conjunction with gendered readings of slavery provided by Claudia Tate and Jacqueline Jones, I discuss possible reasons why Crafts, like Prince, eschews the maternity and sexuality which is so prominent in other female slave narratives such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Our Nig*. I then link this discussion to Crafts' use of the genres of sentimental fiction and social realism to underscore the influence of the ideal of "true womanhood" on the narrative.

## CHAPTER 1.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

*The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*

An analysis of the recent critical literature on Equiano's text indicates that there is a tendency to read Equiano's narrative in the contexts of the different discourses within which it operated and to argue that Equiano either appropriates and subverts the discourse or alternately, imbibes the discourse and becomes a product of it. Regardless of their stance, these critics unanimously agree that Equiano's commercial activities offer him a point of entry into this discourse.

Houston A. Baker Jr. in his work *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* presents an influential reading of African American literature through the lens of poststructuralism and Marxism. Using the narratives of Olaudah Equiano and Frederick Douglass as benchmarks, Baker contends that "under ideological analysis certain recurrent, discursive patterns suggest a unified economic grounding for Afro-American narratives" (39). He uses Equiano's narrative as an example of this thesis and argues that Equiano's piety and spirituality is displaced by his profit making or entrepreneurship as Equiano soon comes to realize that spirituality will not provide him with freedom; only his own economic activities that allow him to acquire capital will provide him with the financial means to purchase his freedom (35). Pudaloff notes that in this way, Baker links commercial and cultural enterprise and implies that the reclamation of African identity is linked to economic exchange (505). Many of the critics who discuss the economic aspects of the narrative reference Baker's work.

Carl Plasa argues that Equiano interrogates Enlightenment discourse to establish his subjectivity. He maintains that Equiano appropriates a number of the major characteristics

attributed to the civilized European male, one of which is industry, and uses them to establish himself as a civilized subject. In so doing, he resists this discourse's categorization of the African as uncivilized and barbaric. Plasa maintains that Equiano also highlights and challenges the way in which slavery fosters a sense of inferiority in the enslaved. Pointing to the incident in Equiano's narrative in which the young Gustavus tries to wash his face so that it will become white like that of his playmate and is appalled to find that his complexion does not change, Plasa notes that while this may suggest that Equiano identifies with whiteness to the point of self-loathing, it is important to note that there is a distinction between the narrator and his younger self. Given the fact that as narrator, Equiano challenges racist beliefs, it is safe to assume that he has "unlearned" the "ideology of whiteness" that his younger self had imbibed (15). I would also argue that Equiano uses this incident to highlight the way in which the dominant ideology of white racial superiority insidiously undermines the self-concept of the enslaved. In so doing, he critiques the psychology of slavery. This sets his writing apart from much of the anti-slavery writing of his time that tended to focus on the physical effects of enslavement to the almost total exclusion of the psychological effects.

Like Plasa, Ross J. Pudaloff also argues that Equiano uses the economic system of which he was a part to assert his humanity and challenge his objectification within this system. He notes that Equiano uses the commercial system and the exchange that it promotes to resist the dominant culture and create a new identity for himself. In so doing, he uses exchange to create his own subjecthood (501). Noting that Equiano's trading was not simply a choice but was facilitated by the nature of the slave society of which he was a part, Pudaloff asserts that Equiano defines himself within the context of market capitalism which enables him to create a complex and fluid identity. He further notes that Equiano's "complex relationship to commerce and

exchange,” is underappreciated because of the tendency of Western discourse to separate “the economic and the aesthetic” (504). He argues that Baker, in his analysis of the economic subtext that informs the narrative, maintains this dichotomy. Thus, while Baker recognizes the significance of the economic aspect of the text, he does not view economics and art as integrated but as mutually opposed (504). Hence Baker adopts a traditional stance that privileges the aesthetic although he ironically takes issue with this stance. This causes Baker to judge the value of Equiano’s text in relation to the aesthetic, and in so doing, Baker devalues the economic discourse that informs the narrative. Pudaloff maintains that Equiano’s work should not be read according to such binaries for it subverts fixed categories and blurs the distinction between the aesthetic and the commercial, the individual and the commodity, the slave and the free (505).

In his essay, “Word Between Worlds: The Economy of Equiano’s Narrative,” Joseph Fichtelberg also explores the economic dimensions of Equiano’s narrative. While Baker, Plasa and Pudaloff argue that Equiano’s commercial activities help to establish his subjectivity, Fichtelberg however argues that the commercial system reinforces the dehumanization that Equiano faces as a slave. As a result, Equiano adopts Christianity to combat feelings of dehumanization that result from his commodification. Thus Fichtelberg credits Baker with devising a new vocabulary for discussing African American literary discourse and posits that the value of Baker’s work lies in the fact that it shifts emphasis, in the analysis of African American literature, from the subject, who becomes decentered, to the “discourse that produced it” (459). Fichtelberg however takes issue with Baker’s assessment of Equiano’s text on the grounds that it downplays the importance of the text as spiritual autobiography (459). He sees this as problematic in light of the fact that Equiano’s piety increases as the narrative progresses. He argues that rather than displace Christianity with economy, Equiano integrates the two and this

results in a blurring of the lines between the two systems. Discussing the way in which Equiano is commodified and passed from owner to owner, Fichtelberg notes that he becomes “a sign” in a “system of exchange” whose worth is determined by his “relation to other commodities.” (469) These signs are the products of capitalist ideology (470). To fill his need for “intrinsic value,” Equiano uses religion as a universal signifier (473).

Fichtelberg’s article offers a reading of the text that in some ways conforms to Pudaloff’s vision of the text as blurring the lines between fixed categories. Pudaloff however implies that Equiano’s subversion of these categories is a conscious attempt to resist and challenge the ideological and discursive framework in which he operated. On the other hand, Fichtelberg contends that Equiano was assimilated into this discourse and any challenge to his discursive context which emanates from his text was a product of the textual contradictions. Thus, Equiano establishes the centrality of Western discourse through his conformity to and acceptance of it. He then attempts to modify this discourse from his position as an insider within it in such a way that affords him greater agency.

Like Baker, Plasa and Pudaloff, Frank Kelleter notes that Equiano creates an identity that is predicated upon his economic prowess. However, like Fichtelberg, Kelleter argues that Equiano conforms to rather than challenges the dominant discourse in which he operated. Kelleter also notes that there is a tendency among postcolonial critics to stress, with the intention of redefining colonized peoples as active agents as opposed to passive victims of history, that cultural identity is not static nor essential but is instead “tactical and situational” (68-9). Kelleter notes that this concept has been challenged on the basis that it obscures the unequal power relations between colonizer and colonized in that it focuses on the creative products of the colonial encounter at the expense of its political ramifications (69). He also challenges the

concept of assimilation, choosing to view it not as a form of resistance in which the colonized appropriates and subverts imperial culture but as a genuine acceptance of colonialist practices. Kelleter maintains that Equiano's narrative demonstrates the latter view of assimilation (69-70). As an example, he cites Equiano's adoption of the colonialist practice of "naming" which results in him using his African name in an effort to identify himself as African and reclaim his power to name himself. Yet this attempt to claim mastery of self is undermined by the fact that Equiano also uses his slave name together with the appendage "the African" thereby establishing himself as a "type" who is subject to the dominance of others. Kelleter refers to this as a type of "ethnic self-dramatization" that is both consciously created by the author but that is also demanded by his position within society and illustrates that while Equiano seeks to assert his African heritage, he refuses to forsake his Western worldview (71-2). In this way, Equiano's narrative exhibits a double consciousness whereby the narrator creates a fictive African identity which he then judges from a Westernized perspective (73). Kelleter further notes that while he presents himself as African, Equiano often assumes the "role of a dominant Western subject whenever possible." This is seen when the English vessel on which he works is attacked by the French and Equiano uses the pronoun "we" thereby identifying himself with the English (74). Thus, Equiano's conformity to the dominant discourse of his times undermines his attempt to establish an independent subject position.

Fichtelberg and Kelleter's argument that Equiano conforms to rather than challenges the discourse of his time is reinforced by Tanya Caldwell who notes that critics tend to read Equiano within the context of colonial and postcolonial discourse while ignoring the fact that Equiano fashions an identity that is in keeping with eighteenth century notions of self (264). Caldwell maintains that Equiano's work thus erases his "otherness" which threatened to undermine his

abolitionist argument (265). Read in this light, Caldwell argues that it becomes apparent that Equiano's work does not resist the status quo but is instead used by him to gain entry into and be included in it (267). Equiano signals his conformity to the status quo by evoking and defining freedom as it relates to British imperialists and by developing the notion that slavery enslaves the master as well as the slave (268-9). Caldwell also notes that Equiano's narrative bears striking parallels to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in that both protagonists have a practical attitude towards slavery which causes them to support the very institutions which their works question (270). Equiano's support of the merchant and landed classes in his argument that Africa become a British colony to facilitate the development of trade between the two regions illustrates his support of imperialism (274). Caldwell presents a convincing argument that challenges the tendency, in critical discourse on Equiano's narrative, to read his work as an act of resistance that subverts the imperial discourse in which he operated.

In contrast to critics such as Baker, Plasa, Pudaloff, Kelleter and Caldwell who argue that Equiano either subverts or is assimilated into the discourse of his era, April C. Langley argues that Equiano constructs a hybrid identity that melds both African and European worldviews. She maintains that Equiano creates a fictive Africa and African identity and uses this to negotiate the societies which he inhabits. Langley argues that Equiano's work therefore embodies an "eighteenth-century black aesthetic" that reflects the black subject's formation of a complex identity that is both African and Afro-British American (98). Noting that Equiano's narrative is representative of Afro-British texts of the eighteenth century that "underscore recurrent African and Western themes that remain pivotal to literature," she contends that in the same way in which these writers merged their African worldview with Western ontologies and

epistemologies, critics who study these texts also need to adopt a similar approach and integrate both worldviews in their analyzes (99).

Although Langley notes that Equiano links work and identity and uses labor to engage with the dominant discourse, (116) she does not focus on the economic aspects of the text. Her discussion of Equiano's attempts to culturally reconcile British and African culture however can be used in my discussion of Equiano's attempts to economically reconcile Africa and Britain. Caldwell's work can also be used to help make the argument that Equiano views himself as both African and British. Equiano's conception of himself as a hybrid subject is reflected in his argument that the abolition of slavery could promote British trade with Africa, particularly if Africa was incorporated into the British Empire and Africans were made subjects of Britain. Caldwell's work, along with that of Pudaloff, Fichtelberg and Kelleter provide entry points for me to discuss the Hegelian dimensions implicit in Equiano's economic argument that seeks to establish Africa as a colony of Britain.

Each of these readings positions Equiano in relation to the master narratives of his age and seek to show that he either challenges/ or conforms to these narratives. Plasa applies a postcolonial reading to the novel to argue that Equiano dismantles the master narrative and the discursive frameworks that had been used to justify his subjugation. Fichtelberg, while arguing that Equiano conforms to the discourse of the times, also acknowledges that he does in some ways challenge it. As opposed to critics like Plasa who argue that Equiano rejects this discourse, Fichtelberg maintains that Equiano establishes the centrality of this discourse and then argues against its hegemonic characteristics of that he finds objectionable. Frank Kelleter also holds the view that Equiano becomes assimilated to the dominant discourse and claims that Equiano's acculturation to Western society undermines his efforts to assert an African identity. Thus while

he integrates the two perspectives, he privileges the European worldview and uses it to judge the fictive African character which he creates. Like Fichtelberg, Kelleter argues that Equiano conforms to rather than opposes the dominant discourse but condemns the fact that it excludes others on the basis of race.

Caldwell advances an argument that concurs with Fichtelberg and Kelleter's view of the text as conforming to as opposed to resisting the discourse of which it was a part. Like Kelleter, she asserts that Equiano argues that all should be included in the bourgeois discourse of his time and she notes that he uses his text to declare his support of the status quo. Caldwell Equiano's attempts to establish historical and cultural links between Eboan and European culture to support his argument that Africa become a British colony. Although Caldwell does not make this point, Equiano's delineation of the historical connection between these two cultures to make his argument that all Africans be included in Britain's economic activities, can also be used to support Fichtelberg's point that Equiano argues that the liberalist bourgeois discourse be extended to all. It is also noteworthy that all of these critics link Equiano's relationship to the dominant discourses of his age and explore the way his commercial activities contribute to his subjectivity and identity formation. Thus in spite of the highly restrictive nature of slave society, Equiano is able to achieve a degree of economic autonomy that enables him to fashion an identity that resists the dehumanization to which he is subjected under the slave system.

### *Mary Prince*

In addition to examining the economics of slavery as it is represented in the works of Equiano and Douglass, Baker, in his work *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*, also compares Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* with the narratives of her male counterparts. In so doing, Baker arrives at the conclusion that "gender produces striking modifications" in the "commercial dimensions" of the slave narrative (50). He

notes that in contrast to the mobility of their male counterparts, females are usually confined to a limited space; that they challenge the ideal of white, genteel domesticity established by the tradition of sentimental literature; and that their stories highlight the ways slave women's "surplus value" was derived from their reproductive capabilities (50-1). I apply Baker's methodology to an analysis of the "commercial dimensions" of *Mary Prince* and *The Bondswoman's Narrative*. This approach reveals that while the gendered economy of slavery limits the female slave's access to economic agency, these women nevertheless resisted their economic exploitation in ways that reflected the peculiarity of their situation. The ways in which slave women's resistance to slavery was shaped by their peculiar gendered circumstances is discussed by Barbara Baumgartner who notes that Prince engages in passive resistance to slavery by refusing to work for others. Baumgartner also discusses the absence of a maternal narrative in Prince's story noting that in addition to refusing to work, Prince may also have demonstrated her resistance to slavery by refusing to procreate (260).

In an essay entitled "The Two Marys ( Prince and Shelley) on the Textual Meeting Ground of Race, Gender, and Genre," Helena Woodward compares Mary Prince's narrative and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and notes that both women faced literary marginalization on the basis of gender and genre and in Prince's case, her race also contributed to her marginalization (15-6). Yet, their personal and literary identities are differently inscribed by race and gender (16). To gain access to a masculine literary world, Shelley limited romantic and imaginative excess in her writing. Prince, because of her race, was forced to prove her morality as a woman and her worth as an individual to establish her credibility with her British audience (17). While Woodward argues that Prince's marginalization stemmed primarily from her race, I contend that Prince was marginalized both on the basis of race and gender for as a slave woman, she was

required to not only establish her humanity but also her worth as a female. In the early nineteenth century context in which she operated, her worth was determined by her sexual purity. Unable to establish this, she opted instead to use the tropes of sentimental fiction to seek the reader's sympathy. These writers underscore a crucial difference between male and female slave narratives. While male slave narrators also relied on patronage and white voices to vouch for their veracity, they were not confronted, like their female counterparts, with the task of establishing their sexual purity. Sandra Pouchet Paquet also discusses Prince's voice in the narrative and notes that although Prince's authorial control over her narrative may have been compromised, her "voice" retains its "distinctive West Indian particularity" (136).

Female slave narrators also demonstrate their resistance to the economic exploitation to which they were subjected by demonstrating their sense of their connection to other exploited workers, not only on the basis of race but also in terms of class. Prince achieves this by linking the condition of the slaves to that of the working poor of England. In her book *Black Cosmopolitanism: Racial Consciousness and Transnational Identity in the Nineteenth-Century Americas*, Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwanko makes the point that "slave narratives, whether as cosmopolitan as Prince's or as geographically limited as Douglass's, must be understood as part of the background of discourses on/of Black transnationalism" (158). She notes that Prince enters the discourse on slavery by demonstrating "cosmopolitan consciousness," a term that connotes her involvement with and cognizance of the wider world and a sense of a community that is based on race (161-2). Both imperialism and colonialism and resistance to them are also forms of cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism influenced the way in which blacks represented themselves and others (162). Nwanko explores Prince's alternate view of the meaning of cosmopolitanism and concludes that Prince presents herself as a "cosmopolitan subject" in

specific ways (163). Cosmopolitanism can also be applied to Equiano's narrative. However, the length and breadth of his travels and the empiricism in his comparison of the slaves and the British poor again indicates that this discourse of cosmopolitanism in the slave narrative is affected by gender.

Prince's narrative is also marked by a documentary quality that has led some critics to discuss it outside of the discipline of literature. For example, in her work "Mary Prince's Slave Narrative in the Context of Bermuda, Her 'Native Place' (1788-1815)," Roiyah Saltus analyzes Prince's narrative to discover insights which it provides into life in Bermuda in the pre-emancipation decades. She maintains that the narrative gives insight into gender roles and the role played by the black population in the economy of the colony (172). She notes that there was no clear demarcation between house and field work as was the case in other slave colonies. Instead, house and field work was combined and referred to as "domestic work" (173). She further notes that in the early eighteenth century some white women in the colony obtained economic independence, yet they were still bound by "the realities of their society ruled by a white male oligarchy," that, by the late eighteenth century increasingly hampered their economic activities. This may explain why Prince is sold by her owner's father although she was legally the property of the daughter (174). When examined in conjunction with primary and secondary historical sources, Prince's narrative sheds light on the nuances of Bermudian slave life and the changing gender roles during the later period of slavery (175). It also provides a view of colonial governance that differs from the way in which this government represented itself. This government presented itself as benevolent and portrayed the colonists as paternalistically caring for their slaves. Prince's narrative challenges this version of history which has been perpetrated

by some contemporary historians (176). The text presents “a picture of a claustrophobic, heavily surveilled, close-quartered and abusive system of enslavement and control” (177).

Schroeder reads *Mary Prince* as a humanitarian narrative because that seeks to expose the baseless pain and suffering inflicted on Prince with the intention of spurring the reader to action on behalf of the victim (266). The reader’s sympathy is elicited through the use of the first person, vivid descriptions of abuse and the presentation of the sufferer as virtuous (264). In this way, the narrative adheres to many of the conventions of nineteenth century slave narratives (268). Schroeder notes that evidence as it is manifested in the body of Mary Prince imbues the narrator with authority and is a potential point of intervention for the reader (263).

#### *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*

Like Prince’s narrative, *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* also illustrates that the female slave passively resists her economic exploitation. It also shows that this resistance was inevitably connected to her reproductive capabilities. The most significant body of criticism on *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* to date is a collection of essays edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Hollis Robbins, entitled *In Search of Hannah Crafts*. This work is divided into five sections. The first section is comprised of essays that examine the narrative in relation to the genres from which it draws. These essays examine the text’s hybrid qualities and the writer’s use of various literary genres. They examine how the narrative conforms to and challenges the genres of the slave narrative and the sentimental novel. The second set of essays examines the text’s intertextuality with *Bleak House* and other canonical texts.

These essays explore Crafts’ appropriation of elements of these works to illustrate the evils of slavery. The third section examines evidence of the writer’s familiarity with the “legal, architectural, and theological” discourses that were contemporaneous with the antebellum

context in which her work was produced (xv). The fourth section examines the gothic dimensions of the novel and seeks to situate it within the genre of African American gothic. Another section consists of essays that discuss the narrative's writer. They also analyze textual and historical evidence and offer various hypotheses as to the identity of the writer. The critical essays in this book focus on the aesthetic elements of the narrative. None addresses, in any sustained way, the author's class consciousness or the narrative's portrayal of labor.

Like Prince, Crafts demonstrates her resistance to the economic exploitation which she faces under slavery by connecting her suffering with the suffering of the poor in other parts of the world. She does this by referencing the work of canonical writers to connect the condition of the slaves with that of the British poor. Crafts' "borrowings" are thus reflective of her cosmopolitan consciousness. Hollis Robbins explains that the narrative borrows from canonical works, most prominent among which is Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*. Robbins notes that Dickens's *Bleak House* enjoyed widespread popularity in America after 1852 among both blacks and whites. Frederick Douglass serialized the novel in his anti-slavery magazine where he described Dickens as "the faithful friend of the poor" who was "intimately acquainted with the dense ignorance, squallid (sic) misery, and pressing wants of 'the London poor'" (73). Characters and themes from this novel were often alluded to in the anti-slavery magazines of the time. She contends that Crafts borrows the words of Dickens and to a lesser extent, Walter Scott and Charlotte Bronte, when she wants to embellish her story and offer social critique. She thus borrows from Western canonical literature but "writes from misery, not merely about misery" (74).

For example, in the opening preamble to the narrative, Crafts uses the words of Dickens's Esther but alters them to reflect her situation as a slave (75). Her description of Mrs. Cosgrove's

suspicion that her husband is cheating replicates Mrs. Snagby's suspicion in *Bleak House*; however, whereas this is comic and untrue in Dickens's novel, it is true and tragic in Crafts' text. As she states, "comic marital suspicion" becomes "brutal reality" in the slave narrative (77). Crafts also draws upon Dickens's description of the abject mental state of the poor to describe the ignorance in which the slaves are kept (81). Although Robbins does not make this point, I would add that this is done to highlight not only the physical but also the psychological suffering engendered by slavery. Robbins asserts that Crafts' "borrowings" should not be considered plagiarism because her status as "property ... complicates and perhaps mitigates" her violation of "intellectual property rights" (82).

As occurs in Prince's text, Crafts' narrative "voice" is also compromised. According to Robbins, "the idea of the speaking subject" is complicated by the hybrid or polyvocal nature of the narration in that Crafts does not simply lift passages from the works of others, but skillfully transforms and incorporates them to suit her authorial and narratological ends and creates what Gates refers to as a "double-voiced discourse" (78). Although Crafts' voice is at times subsumed within the traditions from which she draws, she assumes control of her voice when faced with the danger that her story may not end like the heroines of sentimental fiction, that is, in marriage and "domestic contentment" (80). This change in narrative voice occurs after the scene in which Mrs. Wheeler is accidentally blackened, which "[changes] the complexion of the text from a traditional sentimental novel to something darker" (75). Robbins further notes that although Crafts lifts passages from Dickens, she rarely resorts to "Dickensian rhetoric" but instead uses candid and "biting" prose (80). Robbins's views on the use of narrative voice is similar to Baumgartner's contention that Prince's narrative initially makes use of the language of

sentimental fiction but later gives way to a literal description of the conditions of the narrator's slavery that results in greater authorial presence.

Crafts' narrative also demonstrates that women, in order to travel and gain mobility, often resorted to male disguise. Jean Fagan Yellin discusses *The Bondwoman's Narrative* to show that the text draws on but also diverges from the tropes used in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. As an example, Fagan Yellin cites the fact that both narratives make use of the trope of cross-dressing. Mrs. Wright dresses her favored slave as a boy to help her escape while Crafts dresses as a man to escape the Wheelers plantation. She notes that literary historian Sollors refers to this as an example of the way the "cultural [boundaries]" of gender and race become crossed (110). Fagan Yellin notes that Crafts reverts back to her gender and racial categories once she is free and becomes a member of a free black community. Thus she rejects passing for white. Unlike *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that advocates the repatriation of blacks to Africa, Crafts' narrative suggests that blacks have a right to live and prosper in the United States (114). Another major difference between the two narratives is the fact that although religion is an element in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, the spiritual state of the characters is not the narrative's primary concern. Rather it focuses on the "dilemmas" that "slavery presents" to Crafts (112). Like Stowe, Crafts also generalizes her condemnation of slavery to "all systems of exploitation" (113). In this way Crafts again demonstrates her cosmopolitan worldview.

Crafts also passively interrogates slavery by manipulating categories of race and gender within the world of her text to articulate her resistance to them. The incident in which Mrs. Wheeler's face is accidentally blackened and she is mistaken for a black woman is another example of the way the narrator reverses racial categories to interrogate a society that establishes hierarchies based on race and gender. This interrogation of the categories of race and gender can

be linked to the text's interrogation of the exploitative social system that existed under slavery. Like Equiano, she inverts these categories and undermines the discourse that hierarchizes individuals on the basis of their race. Whereas Equiano interrogates these categories by actively appropriating behaviors that are associated with the dominant group, Crafts symbolically and psychologically resists these categories. Only when she flees disguised as white male does this symbolic resistance become literal. By switching gender and race to change her racial identification from that of a black woman to a white man she interrogates racial constructs that privileged one group over another. She then uses the privileges accorded to this group to rework the gender and racial constructs to achieve her ends. In so doing, she demonstrates the arbitrary nature of these constructs.

Gill Ballinger, Tim Lustig and Dale Townshend also explore Crafts' use of literary references. Like Robbins, these writers conclude that Crafts' skillfully uses her borrowings from Gothic fiction and *Bleak House*. This is manifested in her "sensitivity" to the speech used in these earlier works and her cognizance "of the ways in which that speech might be adapted and extended" (236). They note that she uses the gothic as a lens to view the horrors of slavery. They focus specifically on the Gothic and male Gothic tropes in the story and on the story's intertextuality with Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*. These writers note that there is "tension between" the novel and "its Gothic intertexts" for Crafts reworks some of the gothic tropes (216). For example, the "sins" that are passed down in the genre of the Gothic become the racial heritage of blackness in Crafts' novel that haunts the lives of 'white' characters. In the Gothic, the hereditary weakness is transferred through the female lineage. In Crafts' novel however it is transferred through the male line. She also modifies the structure of social class as it is presented in Gothic fiction re-casting the aristocratic villain the bourgeois lawyer, Trappe.

These critics also question Gates' claim that the text provides unmediated access to the voice of the slave narrator on the grounds that he ignores his own role in marketing the text which is eerily reminiscent of the slave trader, or at best, the abolitionists who authenticated the slave narratives. They also claim that Gates' introduction implies that Crafts was an unsophisticated writer who unconsciously used the tools that were available to her in an artless and haphazard manner. They note that this position appears to be partly rooted in Gates' gender-bias. They challenge and problematize Gates' implied suggestion in his introduction to *The Bondwoman's Narrative* that Crafts did not interrogate the master narratives as did her male counterparts such as Frederick Douglass (216).

Jason Haslam also examines the gothic elements of the narrative. He maintains that Crafts uses the gothic in three ways: to highlight the material evils of slavery for blacks, to attack those who perpetuate the system by showing that white society is corrupt and counterfeit and to show how blacks can "haunt back" against the dominant white society. She shows the way in which white domesticity is "haunted" by slavery. Trappe's haunting of Ms. De Vincent and the "haunting" of the owners of Lindendale are examples of this. The Lindendale house can be read as a symbol for the nation. The Linden tree that haunts the house represents the way in which white domesticity is haunted by slavery. The "portraits and the family they represent come to stand as an image for the way in which white domesticity and white superiority are cursed and rendered 'hollow' by the system of slavery, even as that system supports the materiality of white dominance" (32). Haslam notes that through the figure of Mrs. Wright whose delusion parallels that of the nation, Crafts also exposes the myth upon which the nation is built. This delusion is necessary if the nation is to survive. Only by ignoring slavery, the antithesis of the ideal of

freedom upon which the nation rests, can its citizens convince themselves that they are living in the 'free' New World and not the "old-world 'fortress'" (35).

Like Ballinger et. al., Bernier and Newman contend that Gates has commodified the narrative. They maintain that his claim that the novel was authored by a black woman is an attention getting device that detracts from the commentary on slavery that the text offers and focuses attention on Gates whom they imply is guilty of self-aggrandizing behavior. They analyze the paratext to justify this argument. These writers also argue that Crafts may have been a bonded white servant. To support this claim, they point to her use of racist language to distance herself from other slaves. They also note that her focus is more on class as opposed to race. Thus her critique of the class system and her empathy with other black characters may have stemmed from her status as a white bond servant, not as a slave (158-9). They contend that her use of elements of the travel narrative suggests that she may have been African or European British. They also note that the cliffhanger endings of many of the chapters of the narrative suggest that it was written for serial publication and may have been published as such. The intertextual elements of the novel also bolster the possibility that she was white in that she identifies with the literature from which she draws and the slaveholding elite. Hence her narrative may have been her attempt to resist her marginalized status as a servant. She is not as concerned with articulating the suffering of the slave but with exposing the degraded state of blacks. Her "voice" is generalized and universalizes suffering; this is atypical of the slave narrator.

Adebayo Williams posits that the discovery of Crafts' manuscript shows that there was a strong tradition of literacy among blacks in antebellum America and puts to rest claims by those who doubted that such a tradition existed. Thus, the view of the Harlem Renaissance as the "first

formative period of black literature” may have to be rethought (138). He compares the slave narrative to the rise of the novel in Britain. The novel was viewed as subversive and the British oligarchy felt threatened by it. Similarly, the slave narrative was viewed by planters as a threat to the plantation system. It was thought to represent the collective consciousness of blacks. Williams contends that Crafts’ narrative paradoxically “[extends] the possibilities” of this genre but at the same time “[problematizes] its inner coherence” (139). He notes that the novel “is a desperate mélange of fictionalized autobiography, the gothic, the romance, the sentimental novel, and bristling social commentary” and shows that “rather than being a vehicle for a monolithic consciousness, the slave narrative is itself brimful of hybridity and the intraracially conflicted, a site of intense literary miscegenation and generic disorder” (139). It is for this reason that the narrative was suppressed.

It was not palatable enough for abolitionists as the portrayal of slave life is too brutal and the writer is too condescending while the proslavery establishment would have been stung by her scathing condemnation of slavery and her expose of the falseness of genteel society. The character of Trappe, he contends, forces Crafts to violate the rules of the slave narrative and also ensured that her story would not be published. The novel was also politically incorrect in its portrayal of the field slaves which Williams describes as “abrasive, vitriolic, bristling, and brutally condescending” (146). Crafts was excluded from her place in this emerging literary tradition because of her originality. Crafts’ manuscript and other still undiscovered narratives like it may lead to the transformation of the slave narrative and the African American literary tradition.

Williams compares *The Bondswoman’s Narrative* to *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* and notes that while both writers borrow from the British literary tradition

to which they were exposed, they draw from different genres. He also notes that both narrators are self-validating “to the point of vanity and narcissism” (144). He concludes that *The Bondswoman’s Narrative*, in spite of its flaws in construction, is a great work of art.

### *Objective of my Study*

Drawing on the views advanced in the critical literature, I examine the resistance strategies employed by Olaudah Equiano, Mary Prince and Hannah Crafts and the peculiarities of both the male and the female slave experiences. While the experiences of all three protagonists can be deemed unusual in that their situations are in many ways atypical of that of the majority of the slave populace, their narratives nonetheless reveal the ways that gender conditioned the experiences of male and female slaves. In his sense, their particular experiences can be interpreted as universal and as representative of the slave experience. In their narratives, Olaudah Equiano, Mary Prince and Hannah Crafts emphasize their experiences as slave laborers to highlight the economic exploitation they suffered. In so doing, they critique the racial and social subjugation upon which slavery rested. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* reveals that although the male slave is circumscribed by his slave status, his maleness allows him to exercise a certain degree of economic agency in ways that are in keeping with the patriarchal society of which he is a part. He is then able to use this economic autonomy to help in his construction of an identity that opposes the sub-human identity which the dominant culture projected onto slaves. While the narrators of *Mary Prince* and *The Bondswoman’s Narrative* also seek to construct an identity that resists their status as enslaved subjects, the patriarchal nature of slave society delimits their ability to participate in the economy of slave society to an even greater extent than their male counterparts. Consequently, their resistance to slavery is more

often characterized by passive resistance and is invariably bound to their reproductive capabilities.

The literary criticism of the narratives also reflects these gender differences. Equiano's work is frequently examined in relation to the master narratives of his time to ascertain if he conforms to/or subverts these discourses and to determine how his subject position and identity are constructed in relation to these discourses. Emphasis is placed on the practical measures that he takes to resist his enslavement prominent among which are his economic endeavors. Hence, many critics have explored what Baker refers to as "the economics of slavery" in Equiano's narrative. In contrast, the criticism on Prince and Crafts has tended to leave unexplored the ways in which these female slave narrators articulated their resistance to the "economics of slavery." Because their resistance to their exploitation as laborers was often expressed in more passive ways than the active and overt resistance of their male counterparts, their narratives have not been sufficiently probed for the various ways that this subtle resistance to economic exploitation manifests itself. It is my intention to address this imbalance in the criticism on these two female narratives by exploring what Baker refers to as the "commercial dimensions" of these two narratives.

Prince's narrative illustrates that gender conditioned the female slave's response to enslavement. Prince's initial resistance to slavery is initially primarily psychological but as the narrative progresses, Prince employs concrete efforts to secure her freedom. In addition, Prince's text also demonstrates that the sexualized construction of the black woman by the dominant culture influenced their experiences under slavery. Her narrative also makes it clear that she was aware that motherhood negatively affected the lives of female slaves. Prince's efforts to negotiate and survive slave society reflect claims made by Hillary McD Beckles in his

book, *Centering Woman: Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society*. Beckles notes that the slave mode of production by virtue of placing the black woman's 'inner world' – her fertility, sexuality and maternity – on the market as capital assets, produced in them a 'natural' propensity to resist and to refuse as part of a basic self protective and survival response. Thus, the experience of enslavement created a culture of refusal and resistance that characterized the female slave experience. Through this form of resistance, the female slave was able to claim a "self" and an "identity" (xxii). Beckles further notes that children born of slave mothers took their legal status from their mothers thus "womanhood, as a gendered formulation was therefore legally constituted as a reproduction device that offered the slave system continuity and functionality" (8). He maintains that this resulted in "the ideological defeminisation of the black woman" and "contributed to a gender order that negated black motherhood and devalued maternity" (11). In an effort to contest this "ideological defeminisation," and undermine the social construction of gender in slave society, black women resorted to resistance strategies that included caring for their families, pursuing entrepreneurial activities such as huckstering, and engaging in sexual relations with white men for their material advancement (11).

I examine the ways that Prince employs these resistance strategies to validate the institutions of family and marriage that were perpetually under attack by the system of slavery. I also examine Prince's narrative in relation to Barbara Bush's discussion of the gendered stereotypes of black women that prevailed during slavery and that were attributed to them by the white culture of the time. Bush maintains that to gain a manageable workforce – one that was "controllable, productive and atomized" – whites sought to strip blacks of their culture and project an identity onto them that denied their humanity and justified their exploitation (767). This resulted in contradictory stereotypes of the "Sable Venus," the "She-Devil," and the

“Passive Drudge” (761). The historical research thus illustrates that slave identity – both that which was projected onto them by the dominant society and that which they sought to create for themselves in resistance to the ideological superstructure’s categorization of them as sub-human – was conditioned by the material relations of society.

Crafts’ narrative also demonstrates that gender conditioned the response of the female slave to enslavement. In her book *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire*, Claudia Tate notes that black women’s desire for domestic stability was linked to the need for a politically equitable society. Thus, they connected the domestic realm with the political and the economic spheres (24). Tate refers to this as a “maternal discourse of desire” (26). She then explores the way this maternal discourse of black domesticity is politicized in the slave narratives *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* written by Harriet Jacobs and *Our Nig* written by Harriet Wilson. Tate surmises that while antebellum white women’s novels such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* depicted domestic stability as the desired ideal which had the ability to reform and make society truly moral, black texts such as *Incidents* and *Our Nig* lament the lack of this ideal in black society by highlighting “the violation of black womanhood, maternity, family and home” (26). Tate notes that *Incidents* and *Our Nig* “represent freedom not simply as a desired political condition but as domestic ambitions-marriage, motherhood, and home-in which women have authority as well as men” (49). Tate asserts that it is necessary to understand that female slave identity was socially constructed by the dominant discourse to “discern how fictive participation in these institutions constitutes a political discourse of desire, particularly for black bondwomen” (25).

Tate also examines the difference between representations of freedom in these texts and male slave narratives. She contends that these two female slave narratives “[illustrate] how the goal of freedom becomes problematic in a female text” (27). In *Incidents*, freedom results from

a highly compromised, largely passive, psychological battle” and is “less a region – North” than a space where the protagonist, Linda Brent, has self-autonomy (27). *Our Nig* similarly relies on “maternal discourses to ... critique ... racist ideology, but embedded in those discourses are complementary social critiques” of the white Northern liberal position that ignore and foster Christian hypocrisy, the exploitation of labor and a patriarchal system that renders women vulnerable (27).

I argue that *The Bondwoman's Narrative* also blatantly interrogates the system of class privilege which the institution of slavery supported and in so doing, it highlights the exploitation of labor that occurred under slavery. As happens in *Mary Prince*, this interrogation of the economic exploitation that informs slavery is combined with a gendered critique of slavery that highlights not only the evils of the racist ideology that underpins slavery but also the way “the sexual politics of slavery” affects women, both black and white. Tate’s contention that the slave woman’s quest for freedom is “largely passive” and “psychological” can be related to *The Bondwoman's Narrative*. Crafts’ engages in psychological resistance to the ideas upon which the institution of slavery rests for the better part of the narrative. Only towards the end of the narrative does she take to physical flight to escape her enslavement.

In her book *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present*, Jones discusses the sexual division of labor that informed slavery. She notes that the definition of female slave labor women is problematic given that all activity for slave women, from working in the fields and as domestic servants to the most intimate familial activities, contributed to the preservation and productivity of their owners’ workforce (14). She also notes that, “to slaveholders and later to white employers, the black family offered a steady and reliable source of new laborers; black women reproduced the supply of cheap labor ....” (4).

As occurs in *Mary Prince*, the absence of the discourse of motherhood from the protagonist's life can be interpreted as her way of expressing her resistance to the sexual exploitation of female slaves. While any attempts that Prince may have made to control her sexuality and reproduction to avoid perpetuating this system can only be inferred, Crafts explicitly states that she believed that slaves should avoid domestic entanglements in order to resist entailing slavery on their offspring.

## CHAPTER 2.

COSMOPOLITAN CONSCIOUSNESS; CAPITALISTIC ETHOS: OLAUDAH  
EQUIANO'S NARRATIVE OF IDENTITY FORMATION

Written, self-edited, and published in 1789 with the help of subscriptions from his wealthy friends, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* is a complex work that challenged the explicit and implicit racism that informed much of the literature of British abolitionism even while it reinforced and supported the abolitionist position that called for an end to slavery and the slave trade. In this seminal autobiography that is often touted as having initiated the slave narrative genre, Olaudah Equiano describes his life experiences after he is captured and sold into slavery. As he details his odyssey – his abduction in the interior of Africa, his trek to the coast, his transatlantic journey across the Middle Passage, his enslavement in Britain and the West Indies, and his eventual procurement of freedom – it becomes evident that in spite of the highly restrictive nature of slave society, Equiano manages to develop a sophisticated critical consciousness and achieve a degree of economic autonomy that enables him to fashion an identity that resists the dehumanization to which he is subjected under the slave system. This sophisticated critical consciousness allows Equiano to not only establish the untenable nature of slavery but also enables him to simultaneously interrogate and undermine many of the imperialist ideas expressed in the anti-slavery literature of the British abolitionists.

Kidnapped from the interior of Africa as a child, Equiano is smuggled to the Coast where he is sold to an English slaver and transported across the Middle Passage. This ship unloads most of its cargo of slaves at the island of Barbados before it proceeds to Virginia where the remaining slaves, including Equiano, are sold. Sold to the owner of a Virginia plantation,

Equiano is soon after purchased by Captain Pascal, a lieutenant in the Royal Navy. This purchase marks a turning point in Equiano's experiences as a slave as it sets him on a life at sea that sees him traversing the Atlantic world as he moves between various ports of Europe, the Mediterranean and the Americas. Treated very kindly by his master, Equiano works as a personal attendant to his master and a deck hand aboard ship. His natural curiosity and thirst for knowledge and adventure is fed by the seafaring life which he grows to relish. He learns to read and write and acquires knowledge of basic arithmetic and seamanship; knowledge which is evinced throughout his narrative as Equiano emphasizes his skills and demonstrates his learning in his use of Biblical and classical allusions. After roughly five and a half years at sea, Equiano returns to England with his master with the expectation that his faithful and loyal service will be rewarded with manumission. Instead he is sold and placed on a ship bound for the West Indies.

Equiano is taken to the island of Montserrat in the West Indies where he is purchased by Robert King, a Quaker, known for his humane treatment of slaves. As King's slave, Equiano works as a clerk and a trader among the islands of the West Indies during which time he travels the Atlantic world between the West Indies and the Eastern coast of the United States engaged in business for his master. After four years, Equiano manages to purchase his freedom in 1766 with money that he earns from engaging in trading and entrepreneurial activities of his own.

Although his owner is reluctant to grant him his freedom because he is such an invaluable and resourceful worker, King is persuaded to keep his promise that he would free Equiano if he gained the required sum needed. Out a sense of obligation, Equiano then engages in one more trading voyage for his former master after which he leaves for and arrives in England a year later. He trains as a barber but soon returns to the seafaring life going on voyages to Turkey, the Mediterranean, the West Indies and the North Pole. He then works as an overseer on a

plantation on the Musquito Coast that is owned by his friend, Dr. Irving, before finally quitting the seafaring life in disgust at the discrimination and mal-treatment to which he is subjected on the basis of his race. He states: "I had suffered so many impositions in my commercial transactions in different parts of the world, that I became heartily disgusted with the seafaring life" (220). Equiano remains in England for seven years, then goes on voyages to New York and Philadelphia before returning to England where he settles down to write his autobiography which turns out to be his most successful commercial venture undergoing nine printings with the last edition published in 1794. Equiano travels to Ireland, Scotland and throughout England to advertise and promote the sale of his book while simultaneously advocating for an end to slavery. He then settles in England, marries an English woman and starts a family. He dies in 1797 at the age of 52.

While much of abolitionist literature was dominated by the stereotypical depiction of the African as an unvoiced, unnamed and passive slave who inhabited generalized locations that lacked geographic specificity, in Equiano's work, this stock figure gives way to a fully voiced and active agent. In demonstrating the way in which he forges a new identity that is a fusion of his African heritage and British acculturation, Equiano's work challenges both overt and subtle forms of racism while simultaneously calling for an end to slavery and the slave trade. However, in spite of the fact that Equiano's work is infused with his ideological subject position as a racial and oppressed "other" in British society and its New World colonies, there is tension between this position and his espousal of views that promote what critic Alan Richardson refers to as "benign colonization" (139). Like those abolitionists who often propagated colonial and imperial beliefs in the superiority of the British national character, Equiano also appears to promote this belief even as he condemns racism and argues for an end to slavery. In this regard,

Equiano seems to have imbibed some of the paternalism and colonialism that informed the British worldview. The fact that throughout his narrative, Equiano associates identity, both personal and national with commerce, is further proof of his adoption of the values upon which Britain's imperialism was predicated. These conflicting points of identification are responsible for much of what Joseph Fichtelberg refers to as the "contradictions" within Equiano's text (463). Thus while his commercial endeavors cause him to adopt the outlook of European culture, Equiano still identifies with the oppressed and the colonized.

Nowhere is Equiano's simultaneous challenge to and support of British imperialism more evident than in his cosmopolitan outlook which he develops from his years of traversing the globe. An example of Equiano's cosmopolitanism is seen in his argument that the sufferings of the British poor cannot be compared to that of the slaves. As proof of this he cites the fact that although some of the planters in Barbados treat their slaves humanely, the island still needs to import 1000 slaves annually to maintain the original numbers. This observation is followed by the rhetorical question, "Do the British colonies decrease in this manner?" (106). By making the point that the mortality rate of the British home colonies cannot be compared to that of her overseas colonies, Equiano demonstrates the low life expectancy of the slaves which implicitly develops his contention that the ill-treatment which the slaves endure is not comparable to that to which the British poor are subjected. He thus uses his consciousness of the disparities in the treatment and conditions of the working poor of Britain and the slaves of the New World to highlight the gross exploitation to which the slaves are subjected. In so doing, he disputes arguments made by some proslavers who sought to justify slavery with the claim that the poor of England were treated in a similar manner to the slaves of the British New World colonies.

Equiano further reinforces his point that the high mortality rate of slaves dispels arguments that equate the condition of the slaves with the workers of Britain. Equiano maintains that the brutal treatment that resulted in the high mortality rate of the slaves is legally sanctioned by the colonial legislature. Following his arrival from England to the West Indies, Equiano denounces an Act passed by the parliament of Barbados that in effect gives masters the right to punish their slaves and absolves them from recriminations of any kind if the slave should die in the process. Equiano then rhetorically asks the question, “And do not the assembly which enacted it, deserve the appellation of savages and brutes rather than of Christians and men?” (109). Not only do these arguments illustrate Equiano’s cosmopolitan outlook, they also demonstrate that his critical consciousness is based not only on observation and lived experience but also on formal knowledge that he acquires from his access to and indoctrination into the master discourse of his time. Hence he does not rely solely on anecdotal evidence but instead uses the codified, empiricist discourse that is privileged by the master narrative of the dominant culture to argue his position; a fact that underscores Equiano’s relationship to the dominant discourses of his age.

While Equiano uses his cosmopolitanism to argue against slavery, there is an insidious and sinister aspect to his worldliness in that his cosmopolitan consciousness at times supports and embraces imperialism of the kind that led to his own enslavement. This is evinced in the fact that he sometimes assumes the gaze of the colonizer. Equiano’s vacillation between the outlook of the oppressed and the colonizer is representative of his shifting positionality within the transatlantic world within which he travels and lives. Even from his young days, he identifies with his masters thus even after he comes to recognize his position for what it is – an enslaved and subjugated self – traces of this earlier identification with the

colonizer still remain. Thus his later self that fully appreciates his enslavement is superimposed upon his earlier self that, in many ways, came to identify with the oppressor. The hybrid construction that is his mature self results in a transnational subjectivity that is most evident when Equiano goes to Jamaica and then on to the Musquito Coast to work as an overseer on a plantation owned by his white friend, Dr. Irving. Equiano, who converts to Christianity subsequent to embarking on this venture, justifies his mission by saying that he hoped to win Christian converts among the inhabitants of these regions; a position that is reminiscent of the mentality of the colonizer.

This, coupled with his use of the plural first person “we” to describe the way in which he and his employer trade and interact with the Native Indians of this region, is also indicative of his identification with the colonizer. Equiano later quits this venture as he deplores trading and working on Sundays and the depravity that erupts among the Indians after consuming liquor. He deems such behavior to be “heathenish” and sees it as a violation of his moral principles. In spite of his adoption of a colonial mentality, Equiano nonetheless identifies with the Native Indians and a group of enslaved Africans that he himself helps to purchase to work on the doctor’s plantation. He remarks that he did not encounter any white in this region “that was better or more pious than those unenlightened Indians” and notes that the behavior of the Indians was more Christian-like than that of the whites (206; 214). As he is about to leave this region, he refers to the slaves as “his poor countrymen” whom he had comforted and treated “with care and affection” (211). These conflicting points of identification typify the contradiction that characterizes Equiano’s outlook – while his commercial endeavors cause him to subscribe, on a cognitive level, to the worldview of the colonizer, on an affective level, he identifies with the oppressed.

Yet Equiano's identification with his fellow slaves is greatest when discussing the way they are often cheated by whites out of what "little property" they manage to acquire amidst all their hard labor, a fact that ironically underscores his investment in the commercial system that is responsible for their enslavement. As he details his experiences as the slave of Robert King in the West Indies, he notes that field slaves sometimes take some time out of their break hours to gather some grass that they sell in the town "after toiling all day for an unfeeling owner" (108). He notes that it is common for whites to take the grass from them without payment and moreover to "[commit] acts of violence" on the female slaves (108). He then relates an incident in which a white man to whom he had sold some pigs and fowls subsequently demanded that Equiano return his money. In this particular incident, a British sailor intercedes on his behalf and Equiano manages to keep his money. A leitmotif of Equiano's description of his entrepreneurial activities, however, centers on whites who attempt to and at times succeed in cheating him out of his hard earned property. Equiano constantly associates oppression with economic exploitation. This illustrates that his experiences are dominated by his commercial enterprise. It also reflects his relatively privileged position when compared to that of the majority of the slaves in the New World. Thus he can only fully identify with their experiences as it relates to the racial prejudice and discrimination that undermines the petty trading in which some slaves engage to earn money.

This underscores that Equiano's identity is predicated upon his economic prowess; an idea developed by Frank Kelleter. Kelleter argues that Equiano's conformity to the dominant ideology of his times makes him culturally successful. According to Kelleter, this ideology places value on free trade which Equiano uses to his advantage in that he trades his reliability and efficiency as a worker for a good reputation which he uses as capital or credit (76). This

gives him “economic autonomy” that he uses to engage in trade of his own through which he accumulates actual capital which he uses to purchase his freedom thereby cashing in on his credit or reputation. Kelleter maintains that Equiano’s decision not to escape from slavery but to purchase his freedom is one that allows him to acquire greater future profit: he foregoes immediate returns for greater future returns. His apparent servility thus masks “a selfish, ... capitalistic, trade ethos” that allows him to travel and acquire knowledge (77). Yet, while Equiano is assimilated into the dominant discourse, his stance towards this discourse is also antagonistic in that he maintains that for capitalism to grow, slavery has to end. He views emancipation as providing the liberated with cultural and economic power. Thus in Equiano’s world, emancipation is linked to imperialism. He challenges the exclusivity of imperialist discourse by demanding that the ideals of white liberalist discourse be extended to all (78). Imperialist discourse is also challenged by virtue of the fact that although he is economically liberated, Equiano is still subject to the domination of others. This causes him to abandon the role of “self-made man” and resort to that of author (79-80).

This preoccupation with the economic order upon which his own oppression is predicated also informs Equiano’s call for the economic integration of Africa and Britain; an argument that once more illustrates Equiano’s cosmopolitan vision in that it attests to both the formal and informal knowledge and learning that he gleans from his years of travel. As he is about to conclude his narrative, Equiano makes the point that the abolition of slavery will benefit the British manufacturing industry by providing (if Africa is allowed to become a British colony) Britain with a market that will infinitely absorb its manufactured goods. He states, “the abolition of slavery, so diabolical, will give a most rapid extension of manufactures .... The manufactures of this country must and will, in the nature and reason of things, have a full and constant employ,

by supplying the African markets” (234). He justifies this argument that Africa should be incorporated into the British Empire by rationalizing that this inclusion will provide Britain with new markets for its manufactured goods. He also argues that Africa has an almost limitless capacity to supply Britain with the raw materials that it needs to produce these manufactured goods. He states, “Africa opens up an inexhaustible source of wealth to the manufacturing interests of Great Britain” and “lays open an endless field of commerce to the British manufacturers and merchant adventurers” (234). Africa will therefore, according to Equiano’s argument, become both the supplier of the raw materials and the consumer of the goods that these raw materials produce. He then links Britain’s manufacturing interests to its general economic interests by implying that the future of British commerce lies with this industry.

In many ways this argument both conforms to and challenges the Enlightenment thought that characterized Equiano’s age. The similarities between Equiano’s argument and Enlightenment philosophy is evident in the resonance between his argument and that of Hegel, the quintessential Enlightenment philosopher, on the role of the imperial nation and its relationship to its colonies. In section 248 of his “Ethical Life” Hegel claims that “fully developed civil society” is “driven to establish colonies” in order to preserve the dialectic between production and consumption that is essential to a well-ordered civil society. This gives rise to colonization which may be irregular or systematically planned and state regulated (376). Hegel implies that systematic or state-sanctioned colonization works to the benefit of the state which acquires a new market for its goods and relieves the problem of overproduction by shipping its dissatisfied workers and excess goods abroad. This relieves its problem of overproduction, and creates new markets that fuel its economic growth which re-establishes its

economic and social equilibrium. This movement also causes the mother country to exert a civilizing influence on its colonies which become increasingly industrialized.

That Equiano shares Hegel's view of the influence of the mother country on the colonies is evident in his assertion that "the native inhabitants would insensibly adopt the British fashions, manners, customs, &c. In proportion to the civilization, so will be the consumption of British manufactures" (233). This statement emphasizes his belief that the more Africans are exposed to British culture, the more they will identify with this culture which will cause them to desire British goods. Equiano believes that both these factors will exert a civilizing influence on Africans. He further reinforces this idea with direct statements about the civilizing role that Britain will play in its relationship to its projected colony. He notes, "May heaven make the British senators the dispersers of light, liberty and science, to the uttermost parts of the earth" (233). This implies that in their colonizing mission, the British will pass on their religion, notions of freedom and scientific knowledge. He further notes that "industry, enterprise, and mining will have their full scope, proportionately as they civilize" (234). In his hypothetical proposition that Africa become a British colony, Equiano thus mirrors Hegel's assertion that the colonies will create new markets for the goods produced by the mother country which will in turn exert a civilizing influence on the colony by causing them to aspire to and adopt the culture of the mother country. Equiano also links his proposition to his argument against slavery and the slave trade by asserting that if the slave trade and slavery were ended, the depopulation of Africa would cease and the subsequent growth in population would contribute to an increased demand for British manufactures.

No doubt Equiano's argument reflects his acculturation to British norms and his own dependence on British material goods. His argument that Africa become a British colony is also

linked to his own identity formation and it underscores the fact that he sees identity as intimately connected to commerce and economics. His own achievement of an independent identity – his procurement of freedom, his entrepreneurial activities and his writing of his autobiography – was derived from his commercial activities. By proposing that Africa enter into a commercial relationship, albeit unequal, with Britain, a country that achieved global recognition to become what Hegel refers to as “a world historical nation” by virtue of its economic prowess, Equiano suggests that Africa can achieve recognition as a viable economic entity. By seeking to establish Africa as a colony of Britain, Equiano seeks to not only make Africa dependent on Britain but perhaps more importantly, make Britain dependent on Africa as a market for its goods. In his article, “Word Between Worlds: The Economy of Equiano’s Narrative,” Joseph Fichtelberg maintains that Equiano’s proposition was a creative attempt on his part to give some agency to Africa by removing its liminality and making it an appendage to Britain. Fichtelberg notes that while Equiano’s proposal would ensure that Africa remained marginal in that it would turn the continent into a mass consumer market and make it a receptacle for European goods while ensuring that it offered no competition in trade, the continent would no longer be liminal. Fichtelberg goes on to note that while this position conformed to bourgeois hegemony, it was nevertheless subversive in that Equiano reorders the white world to suit his vision (475-76). Yet Fichtelberg is careful to point out that Equiano is a product of the discourse of which he is a part and any resistance which he poses to this discourse is unconsciously manifested in the numerous contradictions that characterize his narrative, one of which occurs in his argument that Africa become involved in international trade with Europe.

Fichtelberg thus takes issue with those critics who argue that Equiano subverts the dominant ideological discourse of which he was a part. For example, he argues that Houston A.

Baker's claim that Equiano visualizes a "commercial utopia" in an effort to undermine the dominant discourse stems from the fact that Baker superimposes his own ideological positionality onto the text (460). As an example of the way Equiano becomes trapped in the dominant discourse of which he was a part, Fichtelberg cites the way Equiano adopts the stereotypical European view of the African as economically "primitive" (463). This is evinced in Equiano's portrayal of Igbo commerce as negligent when in reality it was characterized by a highly developed and sophisticated economy of exchange. Yet Equiano ignores this and adopts a view of Africa that conforms to the ideology of his time (469). Fichtelberg notes that this, and other prevailing stereotypes of Africans, was not merely a psychological projection of the chaos of European society onto the "Other" but was also part of an epistemology of knowledge that was constructed about Africans (465). He further notes that Equiano, by appropriating bourgeois discourse that subscribed to these views, was forced to distort the image of the African and present Africans through the lens of "bourgeois individualism" (466-67).

I would argue that while Equiano privileges Eurocentric ideology, he also manifests challenges to it that seek to establish the validity of other worldviews. This indicates that he possesses a dual point of identification. While Equiano makes the argument that the Africans adopt British culture, he also underscores the fact that he identifies with Africans and considers himself to be an African. In the same way in which his work for his master allowed him to acquire skills and education and a character of integrity which he uses to purchase his freedom, Equiano seems intent on extending this master/slave dialectic to Africa. It is important to note that although Equiano proposes colonyhood for Africa, he also underscores the fact that Africans will become "civilized," that is, acquire knowledge, such as advancements in science, in return

for this arrangement which they can use to improve their condition and eventually acquire independence as he did.

That Equiano perhaps envisions future independence for Africa under his proposed plan is an idea that can be further supported if one follows Hegel's description of the relationship between colonies and the mother country to its conclusion. While Hegel highlights the benefits which colonies provide for the imperial nation, he also underscores the need for colonies to eventually gain independence from the mother country. Hegel notes that while the establishment of colonies is at first beneficial to the mother country, after a while the colonies come to realize their own free will and right to ownership and assert their entry into civilized society. Although this is not explicitly stated, it can be inferred from his discussion of the way the needs of a fully developed civil society increases. He states that:

the tendency of the social condition towards an indeterminate multiplication and specification of needs, means and pleasures - i.e. *luxury* – a tendency which, ... has no limits, involves an equally infinite increase in dependence and want. These are confronted with a material which offers infinite resistance, i.e. with external means whose particular character is that they are the property of the free will [of others] and are therefore absolutely unyielding. (364-65)

If applied to the colonial relationship, this suggests that the mother country becomes highly dependent on the colonies and looks to have its needs satisfied ad infinitum. This tendency is checked however by the resistance of the colonies; a resistance which frees the colony from its subservience to the mother country while also freeing the mother country from its dependence on the colony. Hegel's contention that older agrarian economies foster a sense of dependence in contrast to industrialization which leads to self-sufficiency and independence further supports his

contention that colonies eventually seek to gain their independence. Thus, the increasingly industrialized colonies acquire a “sense of freedom” (368). Like the master-slave dialectic in which the slave gains a sense of freedom and the master comes to realize his dependence on the slave, the relationship between the mother country and the colony reaches a similar point and is dissolved.

Thus, there is the potential for the colonies, under the relationship that Equiano advocates, to eventually assume their independence and become autonomous in their own right. Although Equiano positions Africa as marginal to Britain, if one follows Hegel’s reasoning to its conclusion, it becomes obvious that it may not always remain in this subservient position. Equiano therefore seems to suggest that colonization is a necessary period of apprenticeship which the colonies must undergo before they can emerge economically independent. Equiano’s position reflects the Hegelian portrayal of the relationship between the colonies and the mother country as one that is characterized by both dependency and antagonism. Thus while he subscribes to the historical determinism of Hegel and attempts to appease the economic interests of the “world historical nation,” implicit in Equiano’s argument is the suggestion that Britain, which has been developed by its trade in and exploitation of Africans, can make recompense by helping to repopulate the continent and contribute to its civilization while also continuing to benefit economically.

In this way, Equiano attempts to appropriate the traits associated with European civilization and apply them not only to himself but to the entire African continent. In his book *Textual Politics from Slavery to Postcolonialism*, Carl Plasa discusses the way in which Equiano appropriates for himself the traits which were associated with European civilization and in so doing undermines Enlightenment discourse that essentialized and hierarchized racial difference

(12). Plasa cites Equiano's adoption of Christian beliefs to construct himself as metaphorically and figuratively white as an example of his inversion and ultimate deconstruction of the binaries created by this discourse. He argues that Equiano appropriates Christianity, which is associated with whiteness and civilization to become a "black Christian." In so doing, Equiano "hybridizes and conflates identities" that, according to the Enlightenment discourse that essentializes race, are incapable of being combined (24). Applying Homi Bhabha's theory of mimicry to Equiano's narrative, Plasa cites this as one example of the way Equiano appropriates other traits of "essentialized whiteness" such as 'civilization, ... nobility, justice, industry, intellect, truth'" (Marren as cited in Plasa 15). Thus Equiano dismantles "the discursive system" used to justify slavery and renders this practice indefensible (Plasa13). Plasa further notes that Equiano combines this mimicry with a rejection of the characteristics which were supposedly constitutive of blackness which he shows to be more adequately characteristic of the whites who oppresses him (15).

Equiano's self-representation undermines representations of the African that were propagated by the dominant discourse. Through his argument that Africa become a British colony, Equiano attempts to similarly re-present the way in which Africa was portrayed in European discourse of the eighteenth century. If Africa were to engage in trade with Britain, Africans would gain entry into the world economy which would provide them with recognition that would help them to resist the view that they were unfit for such activities by virtue of their alleged cultural and racial inferiority. In the same way in which he uses his commercial activities to create his subjecthood, Equiano implies that Africans could engage in commercial activity with Britain and thereby establish a national identity and subjectivity that would undermine their objectification in the dominant European discourse of the age. Thus Equiano's

proposal that Africa become a British colony can be related to April C. Langley's claim that Equiano ingeniously reworks Enlightenment and nationalistic discourses to reconnect with his African heritage. While Langley discusses the way in which Equiano attempts to "figuratively and metaphorically" reconcile his Westernized worldview with his "cultural memory, identity and African humanity" (138), I argue that Equiano uses his immersion and investment in the economic system of his age to attempt to reconnect with his African heritage.

Equiano's reasoning is also consistent with eighteenth century views that posited commerce and exchange as a potentially civilizing activity, an idea that is developed by Ross J. Pudaloff in his article entitled, "No Change Without Purchase: Olaudah Equiano and the Economies of Self and Market." Like Plasa, Pudaloff also argues that Equiano uses the economic system of which he was a part to simultaneously assert his humanity and challenge his objectification within this system. Pudaloff notes that although there is a tendency to view commerce as a soulless enterprise that dehumanizes those who participate in it, in Equiano's eighteenth century world, there was the belief that "exchange and commodification" could help to humanize the individual and "produce a subject where none had heretofore existed" (500). Through exchange and commodification, this subject could gain recognition in the public sphere. This was exemplified by the writers of captivity and slave narratives who exchanged their stories, thereby commodifying themselves, for public recognition and a public identity. Commerce was thus politicized and could be used as a form of resistance (500). The commercialization of the formerly enslaved subject was therefore a radical political act that gave them an identity which before had been inconceivable. It was thus a form of resistance that allowed these writers to use the tools of the dominant discourse yet resist it at the same time (501).

Pudaloff argues that Equiano functions in a similar vein in that he uses the commercial system and the exchange that it promotes to resist the dominant culture and create a new identity for himself. In so doing, he uses exchange to create his own subjecthood (501). Noting that Equiano's trading was not simply a choice but was facilitated by the nature of the society of which he was a part, Pudaloff asserts that Equiano defines himself within the context of market capitalism which enables him to create a complex and fluid identity. Pudaloff maintains that Equiano's work should not be read according to established binaries for it subverts fixed categories and blurs the distinction between the aesthetic and the commercial, the individual and the commodity, the slave and the free (505).

Equiano's argument that Africa and Britain enter into a commercial relationship to achieve economic reconciliation thus reinforces the view that commerce was linked to nationalism and identity. His manipulation of the categories established by Enlightenment discourse also indicates that the identity that he constructs for himself is fluid and dynamic and undermines the tendency of Enlightenment discourse to conceptualize identity as static and essential. Equiano's apparent vacillation between challenging and supporting the colonial discourse of his time can thus be reconciled by taking into consideration the fact that he views himself as both African and British. Hence he seeks to position himself as an African insider in British society. His argument that the abolition of slavery could promote British trade with Africa, particularly if Africa were to be incorporated into the British Empire and Africans were made subjects of Britain, can thus be seen as his attempt to position Africans as insiders within the sphere of British imperial activity. In contrast to the majority of abolitionist writers of his time who never conceived of the enslaved as British subjects and opted instead to portray them as outsiders, Equiano seeks to portray Africans as potential British subjects. It is also possible

that, in making this argument, Equiano was attempting to better win sympathizers to the anti-slavery cause. In this way, he anticipates the arguments of later advocates for Emancipation. Christopher Brown notes that in the early decades of the nineteenth century, ideas of abolition that promoted British imperialism were later echoed by those who argued for the emancipation of slaves. Brown notes that early Emancipation plans were promoted based on the fact that some British writers concerned with British colonial administration began “to conceive of slaves as British subjects as well as the property of slaveholders” with the goal of solidifying British commercial interests (277).

Tanya Caldwell notes that Equiano’s call for Africa to become a British colony is often viewed by some critics as an embarrassment and as a sign that Equiano, who is himself a successful man of commerce, adopts British imperial ideology and becomes an apologist for imperialism (273). In contrast, I argue that while Equiano may have genuinely imbibed this ideology, he may also have realized that to be taken seriously within the abolitionist discourse of the time, he needed to demonstrate how the abolition of slavery would promote British imperialism. Equiano concludes this section of his narrative with a description of his kindly reception not only in London but in the British colonies of Scotland and Ireland, in an attempt to show that the British people would be receptive and supportive of his proposal. He also mentions his marriage to a British woman to emphasize the feasibility of amiable personal and commercial relations between the British and the African. This is also an effort to show that the British people were accepting of the “outsider” and would accept not only commercial but also social integration with Africans. In so doing, Equiano continues to bolster his argument for the internationalization of British relations with the continent of Africa.

In making these claims, Equiano embodies what Paul Gilroy in his book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* refers to as the black Atlantic, a term Gilroy uses to define the African Diaspora or “New World” that was created in the Caribbean and the Americas as a consequence of European colonization. Gilroy refers to this society as a political and cultural formation that expresses the desire of its occupants to ideologically “transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity” (19). We see Equiano’s desire to “transcend” the “structures of the nation state” and “national particularity” in his implicit attempt to position himself as a British subject, and, by way of his economic proposition, to position Africans as British subjects or at the least, as members of the British Empire. Gilroy also notes that African and European values and worldviews often cannot be essentialized and simply pitted against each other and viewed as oppositional. Rather, they often exist in a dialectical relationship that is characterized by dependency and antagonism hence “the intellectual and cultural achievements of the black Atlantic populations exist partly inside and not always against the grand narrative of Enlightenment and its operational principles” (48).

Building on this concept of the black Atlantic in an article entitled “The Rootless Cosmopolitanism of the Black Atlantic,” Gilroy describes the way in which the rootlessness of the inhabitants of the transatlantic world gave rise to the concept of a diaspora that is characterized by a “more refined and more wieldy sense of culture than the [more] characteristic notions of rootedness” (376). Gilroy notes that Equiano acquired not only skills as a seaman and trader that enabled him to better his lot but also “an elaborate and critical consciousness” that enabled him to analyze his experiences and the system that made them possible (372). This sophisticated consciousness is to a great extent the result of Equiano’s international vision that he acquires from years of traversing and interacting with the inhabitants of this Atlantic world.

Equiano's cosmopolitanism thus reflects his shifting and unstable identities that result from his rootless travels in the subaltern outposts of English society. While there is a tendency among some to critics to present either/or arguments that Equiano either conforms to or subverts the dominant discourse, I argue that he vacillates between both positions. His work is thus characterized by a bi-polar consciousness that causes him to both challenge and support the dominant European discourse in which he lived and functioned. Hence he both embraces colonialism and challenges it; he highlights aspects of imperialism that he finds untenable while promoting aspects that he finds progressive. In so doing, Equiano succeeds in carving an identity for himself that is based on both his cosmopolitan experiences and his economic agency. He then seeks to extend this process of subject formation to his entire race through his envisioning of a future commercial relationship between Africa and Britain.

## CHAPTER 3.

RESISTANT LABORER; MANIPULATING DISCOURSES: MARY PRINCE'S  
CONSTRUCTION OF SELF AND IDENTITY

Published in 1831, Mary Prince's eponymously titled narrative is characterized by a heavy editorial presence. Unlike Olaudah Equiano who writes his own narrative and who retained editorial control of his work, Prince's limited literacy forced her to narrate her story to Thomas Pringle, the then secretary of the Anti-slavery Society of Great Britain. In contrast to Equiano's narrative which details all aspects of his life – both personal and private – Prince's narrative focuses overwhelmingly on her work as a slave laborer to the almost total exclusion of her personal life. Consequently Prince's text is dominated by a description of the labor that dominated her life as a slave and the delineation of the abuses she suffers at the hands of her various owners. Critics such as Sara Salih and Moira Ferguson have noted that Prince's lopsided treatment of her life was probably due to censorship by abolitionists who, in their campaign against slavery, were wary of highlighting details in the lives of female slaves that did not conform to the ideal of feminine purity perpetrated by the dominant culture.

They were consequently reluctant to confront issues of sexual abuse and reproductive control that the female slave faced. This illustrates one of the ways that Prince's narrative is informed and constrained by the gender expectations prevalent in nineteenth century British colonial society and perpetrated in the sentimental literature of the day that purportedly represented this society. Thus the discourses of womanhood, marriage, motherhood, the family and domesticity that were integral to the female slave experience become marginalized in the text in a manner that mirrors the ways in which they were devalued in the life of the slave. That a part of Prince's experiences as a slave become marginal within her own narrative reveals how

female experience was circumscribed within the limits of the dominant patriarchal culture. Nevertheless, Prince uses these discourses to assert her agency and undermine those who sought to control all aspects of her life. In so doing, her text illustrates the ways in which the gender complexities of slavery merged with the dynamics of labor. In contrast to Equiano's narrative that is written from a male perspective and that only offers fleeting glimpses into the way in which gender conditioned the experiences of female slaves, Prince's narrative brings the peculiarities of the female slave experience into focus. In the process, she ties the denigration of institutions of womanhood, marriage, motherhood and the family to a system of capitalist, racist, patriarchal oppression.

The emphasis that Prince places on her labors is evident in the opening paragraphs of her narrative where she describes the carefree days of her early childhood. She states that she "was too young to understand rightly [her] condition as a slave, and too thoughtless and full of spirits to look forward to the days of toil and sorrow" (7). The days of "toil and sorrow" are then described as Prince delineates the arduous labor she is forced to perform and the ill-effects of the abusive treatment she suffers at the hands of her cruel owners. Born in Brackish Pond, Bermuda, Prince is initially owned by Mr. Myners. After he dies, Prince, then an infant along with her mother is sold to Captain Williams, who then gives Prince to his granddaughter, Betsey. At the age of 12, Prince is hired out as a babysitter to help earn her keep. Upon the death of Captain Williams' wife, he re-marries and Prince and her younger siblings, who were born while she and her mother were enslaved to Captain Williams, is sold to help pay for his wedding.

Prince is purchased by Capt. I\_\_\_\_ and his wife. Soon after she enters their household, a fellow slave, Hetty, who is owned by Captain I\_\_\_\_, dies due to severe physical abuse and Prince notes that "all [Hetty's] labours (sic) fell upon me, in addition to my own" with the result

that “there was no end to my toils – no end to my blows” (16). After enduring physical abuse from Capt. I\_\_\_\_\_ and his wife that is so severe, she runs away, only to be returned to her master by her father who pleads in vain for an end to Prince’s abuse, Prince is sold after five years to Mr. D\_\_\_\_\_ and taken to Turks Island where she works in the Salt Ponds. In describing the subhuman treatment to which she was subjected in this hostile environment, Prince notes, “my tasks were never ended. Sick or well, it was work – work – work!” (20). After ten years in this hostile environment, Prince’s master returns her to Bermuda and hires her out to work for others. Eventually Prince persuades Mr. D\_\_\_\_\_ to sell her to Mr. John Wood who takes her to Antigua. Prince remains the slave of Wood and his wife for 15 tumultuous years in which she works in the Wood household as a domestic, nurse maid and washerwoman. Prince and the Woods have a contentious and antagonistic relationship that culminates in her leaving the Wood household in England and enlisting the help of the Anti-Slavery Society with the aim of securing her freedom from slavery.

Although she becomes chronically ill from the physical abuse and forced labor she is forced to endure, Prince manipulates her situation to articulate resistance to her enslavers. She devises methods that she hopes will lead to her eventual manumission. One of the first concrete steps that Prince takes to ameliorate her situation is to instigate her sale to the Woods. Prince uses her knowledge of her worth (she notes the price for which she is purchased each time she is sold) to acquire some agency by seeking to gain control of who owns her no doubt with a view to bettering her situation and perhaps ultimately obtaining her freedom. Hence it is not due to mere chance that after she arranges her sale to the Woods, Prince finds the time to engage in independent business activities that allow her to amass some money for herself. During the

Woods's absence from their property, Prince amasses money by growing and selling vegetables and ground provisions, engaging in trade, and hiring out her services.

Engineering a change of owners is just one of the ways Prince manifests personal agency to resist enslavement. Her most overt example of resistance occurs when she attempts to escape slavery by purchasing her freedom from the Woods. The Woods, however, refuse to allow Prince to buy her freedom. Prince's labors on her own behalf create tension between herself and the Woods who fear that her independent business activities will curtail her ability to labor effectively for them. This situation reflects the idea developed by Berlin and Morgan in their work, *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas* that slaves worked for their masters and for themselves and that these "interrelated and overlapping economies" were the site of struggle over the labor of the slaves (2). These tensions are further compounded after Prince joins the Moravian church and marries a free black by the name of Daniel James. This act of marriage, which is itself a form of resistance against her oppression, angers Mrs. Wood who contends that Prince's labors for her husband would detract from the work that she was required to do for the Woods. Not only is the claim made by Berlin and Morgan borne out in Prince's relationship with the Woods, it also bolsters the argument made by Barbara Baumgartner that Prince passively resists slavery by manipulating her illness to avoid working for others.

Baumgartner contends that Prince's resistance to slavery is articulated through her manipulation of illness to avoid her assigned tasks. Asserting that Prince's text itself is a form of resistance, Baumgartner examines the way in which Prince's body and voice are used in the text. She maintains that while Prince presents herself as a passive victim in the early stages of the narrative, she later uses her abused body, which is very visible in the text, as the catalyst for her

resistance to her ill-treatment (253-4). She notes that Prince escapes her child caring responsibilities when her complaints cause the Woods to hire someone else to perform this duty; that Prince uses her physical infirmity to persuade the Woods to allow her to accompany them to England arguing that the change in climate will positively affect her rheumatic joints and to account for her failure to complete assigned tasks. Baumgartner further points to the fact that Prince's infirmities do not seem to affect her labor for herself as evidence that she manipulates her illness to resist her subjugation (260).

Thus Baumgartner interprets the fact that Prince labors for herself but stresses her infirmity when asked to work for the Woods as a form of resistance. She states, "Prince rhetorically manipulates her bodily affliction as a means of explaining and defending her inability (i.e., refusal) to work." In this way, Prince engages in passive resistance; an act which has ideological significance (258). Through her labors for herself, Prince acquires the sum required to buy her freedom but her owners refuse to allow her to do this ostensibly to punish her for defying them and exposing their harsh treatment towards her to the English public. To account for his recalcitrance in granting Prince her freedom, Wood accuses Prince of immorality and argues that if he allows her to buy her freedom and she returns to Antigua, she will harass him and open him to public censure as she has done in England. In this way, Wood succeeds in manipulating Prince's reputation and constructing a "character" for her that justified his refusal to manumit her. Like Equiano, she gains a degree of economic independence through her industry. Unlike Equiano, however, who uses his good character to secure his freedom, Prince is prevented from capitalizing or cashing in on her labors when her reputation is used against her.

Ironically, Prince's editor and supporter, Thomas Pringle, also uses Prince's "reputation" against her, albeit unwittingly. This is noted by Baumgartner who discusses Prince's lack of

editorial control over the production of her narrative and notes that this lack of control compromises her “voice” and causes her to be marginalized within her own text. Baumgartner notes that Prince’s text is characterized by an intrusive editorial presence. She asserts that by printing Wood’s letter, in which he accuses Prince of “depravity,” Pringle explicitly raises suspicion about Prince’s moral character, thereby sexualizing Prince’s body and undermining her efforts to use her body to resist her oppression. By raising this issue, Pringle also implies that the credibility of Prince’s story rests on her “sexual conduct” (261-2). In this way, he perpetuates a stereotype of the fallen woman, which the English, including abolitionists, held of slave women. This is compounded by the fact that public libel cases highlighted Prince’s alleged sexual behavior and further marginalized her quest for freedom and the larger issue of the abolition of slavery, both of which became lost in the sensationalism of the details of her private life (263). In contrast, Prince’s relationship to Ms. S., who transcribed her story, is marked by collaboration as opposed to the appropriation which characterizes her editorial relationship with Pringle (265).

Helena Woodard also explores the connection between Prince’s credibility as a narrator and questions regarding her sexuality. She notes that Prince’s literary marginalization stemmed from the fact that she was forced to explain and apologize for her inability to conform to the code of true womanhood. Woodard explains that this stemmed from the fact that Prince’s personal and literary identities were inscribed by race. As a result, she was forced to prove her morality as a woman and her worth as an individual in order to establish her credibility with her British audience. She had to seek “sympathy for her inability to participate in the cult of true womanhood” because “as a slave woman, [her] compromised abilities to maintain sexual and reproductive control disqualified her for moral consideration” (16). Yet Woodard notes that

Prince still conforms to this code as much as possible by using language that is “poetic, demonstrative and sentimental” (18).

Noting that the white authenticator was a “critical marketing strategy,” Woodard asserts that like Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Prince struggles to present herself in a way that included “feminine purity” (23). However, Prince’s editors compromise her struggle for self-identity and self-empowerment as they seem to privilege the conditions that contribute to her enslavement at the expense of Prince as the enslaved subject (25). While Woodard argues that Prince’s marginalization stemmed primarily from her race, I submit that Prince was marginalized both on the basis of race and gender. Thus, as a slave woman, she was required to not only establish her humanity but also her worth as a female. In the early nineteenth century context in which she operated, her worth was determined by her sexual purity. Unable to establish this, she opted instead to use the tropes of sentimental fiction to seek the reader’s sympathy and complied with the dictates of abolitionist literature by encoding her sexual abuse amid other forms of physical abuse (20). Prince also uses the language of sentimental fiction, a convention of the slave narrative, to challenge the economics of slave society. Baumgartner notes that Prince uses emotive language to appeal to English nationalist pride that sees Britain as a free and moral land. At the same time, she develops the idea that slaveholders are not part of this morality. In so doing, she “connects an abject materiality with those who own and sell human beings for profit; moreover she abjures any associations between ‘feelings’ and ‘profit’ ” (19).

The fact that the authenticity of Prince’s narrative becomes inextricably tied to her sexual conduct underscores a crucial difference between male and female slave narratives. While male slave narrators also relied on patronage and white voices to vouch for their veracity, they were

not confronted, like their female counterparts, with the task of establishing their sexual purity. This situation illustrates that the sexuality of slave women was inextricably linked to their status as slaves and was invariably used against them in all spheres including the economic and public spheres. This is one of the ways the economy of slavery reflected the gender norms that prevailed in the dominant society; a fact that is developed by Houston A. Baker in his work *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. Baker examines the differences between male and female slave narratives and concludes that “gender produces striking modifications” in the “commercial dimensions” of the slave narrative (50).

This difference between male and female slave narratives was predicated upon the sexualized construction of black women by the dominant culture which was used to justify the economic exploitation that characterized slavery. Historian Barbara Bush notes that in an effort to create “a controllable, productive and atomized workforce,” whites sought to strip blacks of their culture and project an identity onto them that denied their humanity and justified their exploitation (767). In the case of the black woman, this gave rise to three dominant and often contradictory gendered stereotypes: the Passive Drudge, the She-Devil and the Sable Venus. Noting that an understanding of these stereotypes is essential to understanding the way black women defined themselves while enslaved, Bush explains that the Drudge referred to those women who bore “the dual burden of work and childbearing;” the She Devil referred to women who resisted “slave labour” (sic) while the Sable Venus referred to the compliant, sexualized black woman. Bush goes on to note that the construction of the purity of white womanhood was achieved “through contrasts with black women, particularly the ‘Sable Venus’ ” (761-62; 773).

At various points in her narrative, Prince seems to personify all three of the prevalent stereotypes about the black woman. At the beginning of the narrative, Prince’s description of her

labors and the abuse she endures epitomizes the drudge. As she devises strategies to resist this oppression, however, her behavior becomes characteristic of the She-Devil. Prince's ongoing effort to take control of her life is reflected in her business activities, her marriage and her request to the Woods that she be allowed to "buy [her] own freedom." Prince notes that in response to this request, Mrs. Wood calls her "a black devil" (31). This indicates that Mrs. Wood views Prince's actions as a form of rebellion. It also illustrates that changes and developments in stereotypes reflect the anxieties of powerful groups" (Pietersie as cited in Bush 762). Prince's observations indicate that she is aware that her actions are construed as a threat to the authority of her enslavers. Prince's metamorphosis from the dominated drudge into the resisting She-Devil indicates that she occupies these identities but also uses them as a site of resistance. As Mary Jeanne Larrabee notes, Prince's relation of her life events and the choices she makes in her life indicates that she is cognizant of the identities foisted upon her by the "racist and patriarchal institutions" that oppress her (462). Although she appears to occupy the roles constructed for her, she constructs herself as knowledgeable in that she adopts these roles yet simultaneously subverts them (463).

Prince's text also demonstrates the peculiarity of the female slave experience, ironically, in the relative absence of a discourse of motherhood and sexuality which is so prominent in some female slave narratives such as Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. In a chapter entitled "When the Subaltern Travels: Slave Narrative and Testimonial Erasure in the Contact Zone," Mario Cesareo uses the term "libidinal economy" to refer to the fact that maternity and sexuality are underplayed in Prince's narrative. He attributes what he describes as the text's muted sexuality to Prince's need to conform to the Puritan discourse of the society in which her text was produced (114). Thus Prince focuses on her labors in an effort to avoid moral censure

for failing to conform to notions of female propriety. Nevertheless, there is enough coded information within the text to deduce certain omitted details pertaining to her personal life. Coupled with the supplemental materials which surround the narrative, these implicit details provide the discerning reader with sufficient clues to infer aspects of Prince's private life that her text leaves unstated.

This idea is supported by Mary Jeanne Larrabee who notes that Prince's failure to discuss aspects of her personal life indicates that for the slave woman, the discourse of sexuality, motherhood, and marriage was constrained by the need to conform to the notions of female virtue. Larrabee states, "there is a complete silence concerning Prince as a sexual being of any sort, a silence imposed by the requirements of abolitionist rhetoric" (468). Larrabee further notes that in spite of Prince's apparent conformity to the demands of abolitionist discourse, "the interstices of her narrative" nonetheless subverts this discourse by hinting at Prince's sexual relationships in the fact that there were several men willing to help her purchase her freedom. Larrabee refers to this as part of "the epistemology of the text's resistance" (470).

Hence, while her marriage is the only personal relationship that she describes in any detail, sufficient information within Prince's text suggests that she has sexual relationships with several men. Moira Ferguson has speculated that Prince may have had a sexual relationship with Mr. D\_\_\_, her master on Turks Island. To support this claim, she cites the fact that Mr. D\_\_\_ brings Prince's mother and young sister to Turks Island and then takes her with him to Antigua after he leaves his business in the hands of his son (10). There is also the fact a white man by the name of Captain Abbot lends Prince money to buy her freedom but when the Woods refuse to allow her to purchase herself, Prince returns the money to him. In the libel trial that Wood brings against her in England, it was revealed that Prince had a seven-year relationship with him.

Prince also mentions a Mr. Burchell who was willing to lend her the money needed to buy her freedom from the Woods in exchange for which she would serve him a while. While some readers may have pointed to these relationships as justification of the stereotype of the black woman as promiscuous and morally impure, it is noteworthy that Prince used her sexual relationships with white men to exercise sexual agency in a way that helps her to resist her oppression. This is a point made by Bush who notes that some slave women often engaged in relationships with white men as a survival strategy that “often facilitated slave women’s independent ‘business’ activities” (769,771). Thus in an environment that commercialized the sexuality of black women, Prince controlled her sexuality by choosing her sexual partners to her material advantage.

Hence through the absence of a discourse of maternity in her text, Prince undermines the identities foisted upon slave women. Baumgartner notes that Prince’s failure to discuss motherhood may be interpreted as a form of resistance to oppression. Commenting on the absence of a maternal narrative in Prince’s story, Baumgartner notes that in addition to using her illness as an excuse to avoiding working for her owners, Prince may also have demonstrated her resistance to slavery by refusing to procreate (260). It is not unlikely that Prince may have made the choice not to have children based on her status as a slave. No doubt she learned from the experiences of her mother who was forced to take her children to the slave market and watch them be sold away from her. In describing this incident, Prince shows that families were torn apart under slavery. She states, “it was a sad parting; one went one way, one another, and our poor mammy went home with nothing” (12). Prince’s mother’s unwilling compliance in the sale of her children no doubt caused Prince to view slave motherhood as debased. She thus saw slave

mothers rendered powerless in the face of the patriarchal capitalist forces that drove the institution of slavery.

In addition to her mother's experience, Prince also describes the death of the pregnant slave, Hetty, to illustrate that for the abused female slave, pregnancy could in fact end in fatal results. Hetty, a slave from Martinique, is flogged by Captain I\_\_\_ during pregnancy, goes into premature labor and gives birth to a stillborn child. She never fully recovers from the experience but returns to work and is subjected to continued beatings which lead to her eventual death. Prince notes that "the manner of [Hetty's death] filled me with horror. I could not bear to think about it; yet it was always present to my mind for many a day" (16). Observing and experiencing how it felt to be treated as property and the effect that the sale of her children had on her mother, as well as the way Hetty's pregnancy contributed to her death, Prince likely made the decision to spare herself and any of her potential offspring a similar fate. In this way, Prince escapes her "biological destiny" and in so doing, avoids producing any "surplus value" for the capitalist interests for which she was property. Prince also avoids perpetuating the transgenerational trauma that results when the oppressed are made complicit in the exploitation of their children. This in itself is a form of resistance against the dominant economic and patriarchal discourse of slave society.

While Prince eschews the maternal narrative, her marriage indicates that she craves not only freedom but also domestic stability. This typifies the female slave experience in that domestic concerns were often intertwined with the female slave's quest for freedom. These ideas are developed by Claudia Tate in her book *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire* and by Jacqueline Jones in her work *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*. Tate and Jones note that in female slave narratives, the political desire for freedom is often linked to domestic concerns and

the fates of their heroines and is invariably complicated by the sexual politics of slavery.

Prince's narrative bears out this assertion. Prince shows that domestic life is undermined by slavery when she notes that she did not enjoy "much happiness in [her] marriage" due to the fact that she was a slave (30). Indeed, Prince's quest for freedom is influenced in large part by her desire for a stable and happy family life which is tied to her reunion with her husband. This is underscored by the fact that Prince, no doubt with her own situation in mind, returns to the theme of the separation of families at the end of her narrative by asking the question, "How can slaves be happy when they ... are separated from their mothers, and husbands, and children, and sisters, just as cattle are sold and separated?" (37).

These observations are also indicative of the way Prince relates her individual suffering to the entire slave collective. Like Equiano, her travels facilitate her growing cosmopolitan consciousness that she uses to contextualize the suffering of the enslaved within a broader framework of economic exploitation. In this way, she voices her resistance to slavery. Nwanko credits Prince's cosmopolitan consciousness to her growing sense of a connection with others on the basis of race (161-2). I believe that in addition to race, Prince's cosmopolitanism can also be related to the issue of class. After she travels to England, Prince remarks that the British working class earn wages, are free to choose their employers and can leave their jobs if dissatisfied with their treatment. She states, "no slaves here – no whips – no stocks – no punishment, except for wicked people. They hire servants in England ... they can't lick them. Let them work ever so hard in England, they are far better off than slaves" (38). She also notes that "all slaves want to be free." Like English servants, they desire "proper treatment," "proper wages," and "proper time given ... to keep them from breaking the Sabbath" (38). By pointing out the differences between the two groups, she indicates that she is aware that while both groups

are workers, in contrast to the workers of England, the slaves possess no rights and are offered no legal protection

Prince's argument also indicates that unlike Equiano, who gains both informal and formal knowledge, Prince's knowledge is primarily informal and is based almost exclusively on observations and lived experiences. An example of the way Prince uses her lived experiences to resist oppression is seen when she returns to Bermuda from Turks Island. Baumgartner notes that Prince's experience on Turks Island enables her to resist oppression when she returns to Bermuda; for when she leaves the harsh discipline of this environment where resistance of any kind is rewarded with even greater punishment, she devises strategies that allow her to exert her agency and escape the total domination that characterized life on Turks Island. Baumgartner further notes that this resistance is not only Prince's way of critiquing slavery, it also reflects the growth of her self-esteem and her "widening worldview" (359-60).

Prince's "widening worldview" also becomes apparent when on reflecting on her experiences on Turks Island, she deviates from her personal narrative to detail the experiences of fellow slaves. Prince describes the treatment of "old Daniel," a fellow slave laborer in the Salt Ponds at Turks Island. Lame in the hip, this slave receives brutal whippings from Mr. D\_\_\_\_ for his failure to keep up with the other slaves in the gang. That Prince and the other slaves see their future in old Daniel becomes clear in Prince's observation that, "he was an object of pity and terror to the whole gang of slave, and in his wretched case we saw, each of us, our own lot, if we should live to be as old" (21). Through her portrayal of this slave, Prince individualizes old Daniel, who becomes a subaltern among the slaves, due to his age, and in so doing, she elicits sympathy and pity for him. Prince contends that it is her "duty to relate" the "horrors of slavery" that she has witnessed, "for few people in England know what slavery is" (21). This explicitly

illustrates Prince's determination to highlight the plight of all slaves and not restrict her narrative to a relation of her personal woes. Not only does she generalize her suffering to that of other slaves, she also describes abuses suffered by specific slaves. After relating old Daniel's plight, Prince makes her famous and often-quoted statement, "I have felt what a slave feels, and I know what a slave knows" (21). Prince bases her credibility on experience and observation. Prince immediately follows this assertion with a description of the situation of Ben, another slave owned by Mr. D\_\_\_\_. Ben steals food due to hunger and is strung up by his hands and repeatedly flogged by Mr. D\_\_\_ after he is found out. In an attempt to justify his actions, Ben points out that the master's son, Master Dickey, often did the same: Master Dickey follows this unwelcomed analogy by driving a bayonet through Ben's foot to punish him.

Prince also describes the death of Sarah, a female slave, "a little old woman among the slaves," at the hands of Master Dickey whom she characterizes as a "cruel son of a cruel father" (22). Sarah, who is physically and mentally ill, is severely beaten by Master Dickey and thrown into a bush covered with "sharp venomous prickles" because she did not wheel a barrow quickly enough to please him. Noting that Sarah succumbed to her injuries a few days later, Prince asserts, "in telling my own sorrows, I cannot pass by those of my fellow-slaves – for when I think of my own griefs, I remember theirs" (22). Not only is Prince forever cognizant of the suffering of those who are enslaved, she becomes an advocate for their freedom even as she fights for her own. Hence after she is taken on a journey to the countryside of Antigua with her owners, Prince observes that "the field negroes . . . are worked very hard and fed but scantily" (28). That she lived in the city no doubt would have allowed her to compare her own lot with that of blacks enslaved in the countryside.

Prince's travels in the Caribbean and later to the mother country coupled with her expanding worldview and her cosmopolitan consciousness, indicates that her narrative, like that of Equiano's, is emblematic of what Paul Gilroy refers to as the "Black Atlantic." Gilroy uses this term to describe the "intercultural and transnational formation" of culture that arose from the transatlantic slave trade (Salih viii). Gilroy notes that Equiano, in addition to acquiring skills as a worker, also acquires a sophisticated "critical consciousness" that enabled him to analyze and contextualize his experiences within the "system" that gave birth to them (372). Prince similarly demonstrates a critical awareness that allows her to make sense of and relate her experiences as a slave in the British West Indies, and later in England, to the larger system of colonial dominance upon which her exploitation was predicated. Equiano's and Prince's critical consciousness reflect differences in their gender and social positions. This is seen for example in the fact that while they both compare the situation of the slaves with that of the British working class, Equiano uses empirical evidence in the form of figures to aid his comparison. In contrast, Prince uses anecdotal observation and personal experience. This reflects his privileged position in British society. As an educated man with connections to those who possess social standing in this society, he is privy to the master narrative and the codified information that characterizes this discourse. In contrast, Prince's reliance on observation reflects her position as the marginalized outsider in this society.

In spite of her subaltern status, Prince nevertheless manages to articulate her situation as a slave in an unprecedented way for a female slave in nineteenth century West Indian society. Prince's narrative demonstrates that slaves were aware that the exploitation to which they were subjected under slavery was linked to the identities projected upon them by the dominant culture. As a marginalized "Other" at the base of society, Prince asserts her subjectivity by manipulating

stereotypes of the black woman perpetrated by the ideological superstructure. In so doing, she reinscribes the roles set out for her with a view to exerting agency over her life and ultimately obtaining her freedom from oppression. Although Prince appears not to have succeeded in her quest to obtain her freedom from the Woods and to return to her husband in Antigua – she disappears from the public records shortly after the publication of her narrative and nothing is known about the remainder of her life – the fact that she manages to produce a text that offers a rare glimpse into the strategies of female slave resistance in the West Indies indicates that she was nonetheless able to construct a self and identity independent of the dominant discourses that sought to subjugate her.

## CHAPTER 4.

## LABOR AND THE FEMALE SLAVE EXPERIENCE

IN *THE BONDWOMAN'S NARRATIVE*

Published in 2002, after being unearthed by Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is a recently discovered text. Because it was not published at the time in which it was written and the identity of its author has not been positively established, there is debate over whether it is based on the true life experiences of its author or whether it is a fictitious account of a slave's life rendered as autobiography. Its protagonist, Hannah Crafts is born into slavery in the American South. Of mixed race, she is trained as a domestic slave. In comparison to her fellow slaves, Crafts enjoys a life of relative privilege as a lady's maid. Taught to read during childhood, she grows into adulthood a shrewd observer of the white society around her and a discerning judge of character. Like Mary Prince and other female slave narrators, Crafts makes use of the genre of sentimental fiction and like these narrators, she implicitly relates her own situation to the heroine of this genre. Sentimental literature reified the construct of ideal womanhood that pervaded white society in the nineteenth century. Confined to the domestic space, the heroine of this literature was depicted as pious, virtuous, innocent and nurturing. These qualities were thus associated with the feminine in contrast to the male hero who was depicted as a provider and protector who inhabited the public, masculine domain. In this way, sentimental literature privileged gender constructs that supported the patriarchal paradigm upon which capitalist society rested.

Hazel Carby notes that this genre reinforced the virtues of true womanhood (piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity) that were viewed as social conventions and reinforced in the

literature of the day. Carby further notes that black women were constructed in opposition to the white heroine who was depicted as embodying these virtues. Therefore black women's writing of the period needs to be positioned "within the dominant discourse of white female sexuality in order to" make sense of the ways in these writers appropriated, altered and undermined this ideological discourse (20-25). Crafts is one such writer who interrogates and challenges this ideological discourse by showing that the institutions of womanhood, marriage, motherhood and the family, so highly prized in sentimental literature and the white genteel society purportedly represented in this genre, are devalued in the life of the slave woman. By developing this idea from the point of view of the female slave experience, she highlights the gender complexities of slavery and their intersections with the dynamics of labor in a capitalist, racist, patriarchal system.

Through her portrayal of labor – her own labor and that of the slaves in general – Crafts links the economics of slavery to the condition of the slave woman. Crafts' emphasis on labor is noted by Gates in the introduction to the narrative: he explains that "though other mixed-race narrators, such as Harriet Wilson or Harriet Jacobs, stress industry and hard work, none makes it a fetish in the way that Crafts does" (lxvii). Although Gates' description suggests that Crafts irrationally harps upon the trait of industry, in reality, she uses this trait to engage in a very deliberate interrogation of the economic oppression, racial inequality and brutal exploitation that characterized slavery in the American South. She reveals that for the slave, industry and hard work does not result in an improvement of individual condition but rather contributes to continued oppression.

Crafts' preoccupation with work is evident from the very first page of her story. In the second paragraph of the first chapter, she states, "no one seemed to care for me till I was able to

work, and then it was Hannah do this and Hannah do that ...” (5). She then notes that she soon became aware that her race “would forever exclude” her “from the higher walks of life and condemn her to a life of “toil unremitted unpaid toil ... without even the hope or expectation of any thing better” ( sic 6). Not only do these statements indicate her cognizance of the fact that she is only valued because of her ability to work, they also underscore her consciousness of her economic exploitation as evinced in the fact that she stresses that her labor is “unpaid.”

That Crafts is aware that the political economy of American society was rooted in slavery and that this was extremely profitable for the planter class is evident when she comments on the splendor of her master’s plantation. Through this image, she contrasts the slaves’ lot with the lives of the members of the plantocracy. After observing the normally closed chambers of the Lindendale plantation that were opened in preparation for her master’s upcoming nuptials, Crafts states, “... we saw on all sides the appearance of wealth and splendor, and the appliances of every luxury. ... we thought our master must be a very great man to have so much wealth at his command, but it never occurred to us to inquire whose sweat and blood and unpaid labor had contributed to produce it” (14).

To compensate for her lack of freedom and material possessions, Crafts acquires knowledge and education and, like the heroine of sentimental fiction, she builds her character by developing desirable character traits. She surreptitiously learns to read and compensates for her lack of formal schooling with knowledge of human nature that she acquires by studying the characters of those around her. Quietly observant, she notes that this is a “habit ... sharpened perhaps by the absence of all elemental knowledge” (27). She tells the reader that “instead of books,” she “studied faces and arrived at conclusions by a sort of sagacity that closely approximated to the unerring certainty of animal instinct” (27). In this way, she acquires insight

into the lives and characters of those around her. Thus, when her master's bride arrives at the plantation, Crafts notes that while her new mistress examines her physical surroundings and material possessions, she examines the new mistress making "a mental *inventory* of her foibles, and weaknesses, and caprices" (27). The use of the word "inventory" indicates a certain calculation on the part of Crafts.

Indeed, she describes her acquired literacy and her assessment of character in financial terms. She notes that Uncle Silas, one half of the old couple who teaches her to read, was "the possessor of *sterling worth*" (10). Emulating her mentors, she seeks self-improvement by "gathering up ... crumbs of knowledge ... adding little by little" to her "*stock* of information" (10-11). Crafts also seeks to "[cultivate]" her "moral nature" and acquire desirable character traits such as integrity, honesty and industry. Noting that she "can never be great, nor rich; [nor] hold an elevated position in society," she seeks instead to do her "duty" and "be industrious, cheerful, and true-hearted" (11). She takes solace in the universal qualities of "faith, and hope, and love" which "contain within themselves a *treasure* of consolation for all the ills of life" (11). As she manifests these traits, she becomes a "*repository* of secrets" and dispenses "advice and assistance" (11). While Crafts casts herself in the role of the heroine of sentimental fiction who is pious and self-sacrificing, she acknowledges that for a slave woman, there is no hope for upward mobility or material wealth. Thus what would have been material wealth is transmuted into a wealth of character and spirit. In this way, Crafts seeks to build self-esteem and in so doing, psychologically combat the dehumanization which slavery foists upon her.

Yet like Equiano, she realizes that, as Baker puts it, piety will not give her freedom; only economic exchange can do this (35). Crafts' realization of this fact is reflected in her request to Uncle Silas and Aunt Hetty, and later, Mrs. Henry to purchase her. The former, however, are too

poor to do this and the latter is bound by an oath to her deceased father never to buy or sell slaves. Mrs. Henry's father is motivated to this take action at the end of his life by remorse and regret after he comes to realize that the traffic in slaves was "the greatest crime ... of which a human being could be capable" (127). In this way, the narrative condemns the commodification of humans that occurs under slavery. Yet this promise that binds Mrs. Henry to her father's wishes and prevents her from purchasing Crafts indicates the patriarchal domination to which women, both white and black, are subjected. This oppression is also evident in the case of Mrs. Wright who, rather than have her favorite female slave sold to slave traders, attempts to help her escape. Mrs. Wright is caught, charged and incarcerated. This illustrates that the legal system is complicit with the slaveholding interests. As Haslam notes, Mrs. Wright is "right" but her action is judged to be illegal (35). Her total subjection to the patriarchal system is made evident by her incarceration and her delusional assertion that she is looked after by the "state." She is thus punished for having betrayed her class in favor of identification with her sex/gender. Thus while both of these women identify with one of their own gender, they are prevented, by their class affiliations, from assisting them in any concrete way. This indicates that under patriarchal capitalism, class identification is given precedence over gender identification and this ensures that gender oppression is perpetuated. This cements the economic and social power of the white upper class male elite. By ensuring that white females identify with their class rather than their gender, white males who control own and control the means of production, foil any attempts at gender solidarity and retain control over their slaves and the actions of the females of their class. Because class is invariably tied to race in a society and economy that is based upon racial slavery, identification across racial lines is also curtailed. Thus, racial and gender oppression serve to consolidate their white male privilege and power.

That class identification is given preference over gender identification is underscored by Crafts' own class consciousness. She implicitly compares the situation of the female slave as it relates to marriage, motherhood and womanhood with that of the white woman. In so doing, she illustrates the differences between white and black female sexuality. Like Prince's narrative, Crafts' narrative is characterized by an absence of the discourse of motherhood and sexuality that is so prominent in other female slave narratives such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Our Nig*. In discussing Prince's narrative, Cesareo refers to the fact that maternity and sexuality are underplayed. He refers to this as the text's "libidinal economy" (114). There is a similar "libidinal economy" in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*. While Crafts longs to be re-united with her own mother and finds a number of mother surrogates in her journeys, she herself eschews being a mother.

In the same way in which Baumgartner interprets Prince's childlessness as a form of passive resistance against the system of slavery, Crafts' childlessness is a form of passive resistance that allows her to escape domestic entanglements, avoid contributing to her owner's "surplus profit," and avoid perpetuating a system that she abhors. Unlike Prince who does not discuss children and motherhood, Crafts explicitly states her belief that the slave should remain celibate and thereby avoid perpetuating the system of slavery. She also notes that slaves should not marry: she explains that when slaves are "in a state of servitude marriage must be at best a doubtful advantage," for it "complicates" the master-slave relationship and is the cause of "many troubles and afflictions that might otherwise be escaped" (131). Thus, to be "content," slaves "should always remain in celibacy" (131). She then asserts that the "responsibilities" of "marriage can only be filled with *profit*, and honor, and advantage by the free" (130-31). Returning to this theme later in her narrative after Mrs. Wheeler sends her to live with the field

slave and “gives” her to the field hand, Bill, as a form of punishment, Crafts reiterates her belief that slaves should avoid marriage. She states that marriage among slaves, “[perpetuates]” slavery and that she had “spurned domestic ties ... because it was her unalterable resolution never to entail slavery on any human being” (206-07). Crafts’ use of the word “profit” suggests that in the same way in which she conceives of character in financial terms, she conceives of the husband/wife relationship in such terms. She implies that when slaves enter into such a relationship, the only person who profits is their owner who owns the offspring which such a relationship may produce. The point can no doubt be made that Crafts’ call for celibacy among slaves represents self-annihilation. This however underscores a paradox of Crafts’ resistance to the economic exploitation that characterizes slavery: when human reproductive worth becomes tied to economics and class, any attempt at resistance on the part of the subjugated that involves stemming reproduction may potentially result in self-inflicted genocide.

By refusing to reproduce, Crafts refuses to contribute to the surplus value of her master and add more labor power to a system that is built on the use and abuse of this labor. Thus, when her passive resistance is curtailed by forced marriage, Crafts resorts to active resistance. She is determined not to reproduce a cheap supply of labor for her owners, and hence is determined not to bring children into the system of slavery. This is her way of resisting slavery. She states:

Had Mrs. Wheeler condemned me to the severest corporeal punishment ... I should have resigned myself with apparent composure to her behests. But when she sought to force me into a compulsory union with a man whom I could only hate and despise it seemed that rebellion would be a virtue. (206)

Here we note that Crafts, who has learned to cope with the psychological abuse of slavery, and who believes she can adjust to its physical abuses, refuses to submit to its sexual abuses. Hence when relegated to the fields, Crafts flees, not only because she finds her potential marriage partner repulsive but also because she refuses to contribute to the perpetuation of a system of exploitation, a fact which is underscored as she reflects upon her impending situation. She again highlights the hereditary nature of slavery which she had commented upon in the opening pages of her narrative noting that, “the greatest curse of slavery is it’s {sic} hereditary character. The father leaves to his son an inheritance of toil and misery . . . . And the son in his turn transmits the same to his offspring and thus forever” (200). Hence her conscious decision not to have children is her attempt to assert control, albeit limited, over her life, and in so doing, resist slavery. It is a subversive act laced with political significance. When relegated to the fields and “given” to the field hand, Crafts opts to flee slavery rather than enter into a domestic arrangement that would effectively end her resistance to slavery.

That she does not capitalize on previous opportunities to escape slavery opting to flee only after she is exiled to the fields, relegated to the low class slave masses, and forced to consort with a field hand, has been read by critics such as Williams and Gates as a sign of her elitism. However, Crafts’ revulsion at Bill’s person and the conditions in which he lives should not obscure the fact that she also has ideological objections to such a union. Her reasons for fleeing involve more than her shock at her loss of status and physical comfort; it also represents her loss of what limited control she possessed over her reproductive and maternal rights. In his essay “The Problem of Freedom in *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*,” John Stauffer notes that, “it is not so much slavery itself but involuntary marriage and sex” that propels Crafts to flee (64). While her

forced “marriage” is the ostensible reason for her flight, it is important to note that Crafts uses the discourse of “marriage and sex” to resist slavery.

In this way, Crafts’ narrative underscores Claudia Tate’s assertion that in female slave narratives, the political desire for freedom is linked to the domestic concerns and situations of their heroines and is invariably complicated by the sexual politics of slavery (26). Analyzing the narratives *Incidents* and *Our Nig* to show the way in which their heroines are restricted by their motherhood, Tate notes that, “white society regarded [slave women] as breeders .... hence female slaves had only slight biological claim on the institution of motherhood .... no claim on the institution of marriage at all” thus “although compelled to be mothers, [they] existed ... outside institutions of womanhood, marriage, motherhood and family” (25). These sentiments are echoed by Jacqueline Jones who notes that, “to slaveholders and later to white employers, the black family offered a steady and reliable source of new laborers; black women reproduced the supply of cheap labor ...” (4).

Hazel Carby makes similar observations in her work *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. She analyzes the ideology of the cult of true womanhood which was rooted in slavery and perpetuated in the literature of the antebellum period and beyond. Carby notes that the cult of true womanhood was a sexual ideology that served to order “the contradictory material circumstances of the lives of women” and enabled the planter class to control the reproductive function of all women. This ideology controlled the reproductive function of white women which ensured the racial purity of their offspring and consolidated the property of this class (Clinton as cited in Carby). At the same time, it bound the “reproductive destiny” of black women “to capital accumulation; [they] black women gave birth to property and, directly, to capital itself in the form of slaves, and all slaves inherited their status

from their mothers” (23). Carby further notes that the virtues of true womanhood were viewed as social conventions that were reinforced in literature which created the heroine of sentimental fiction. The black woman was constructed in opposition to the white heroine (24-25). This created “a dialectical relationship” that not only stereotyped both groups of women, but also mystified “the social relations of slavery” (30-31). Crafts’ narrative demystifies these relationships. Through her struggles to escape her reproductive destiny, Crafts provides a gendered critique of slavery that highlights not only the evils of the racist ideology that underpins slavery but also illustrates that “the sexual politics of slavery” affects women, both black and white.

Thus the maternal discourse that is so prominent in some female authored slave narratives, such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Our Nig* also informs *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* albeit in a latent manner. In discussing *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Baker notes that Brent asserts control over her sexuality and curtails her master’s power to violate her by choosing a sexual partner of her own rather than subject herself to her master’s lust. In this way, she “neutralizes” his power over her (52-3). Like Crafts, Brent is also remanded to life among the more common slaves. Brent however does not express the kind of revulsion that Crafts does nor does she advocate the cessation of slave reproduction. Thus while Brent negotiates her situation by asserting her right to choose a sexual partner, Crafts gains control of her body and sexuality by running away. Her successful escape allows her to avoid a “compulsory marriage” that she finds abhorrent, and it deprives her masters of not only her labor but also of any economic gains which the offspring of this forced union may have produced.

While this discourse is the defining feature of these texts, in Crafts’ narrative it is embedded in the more prominent discourses of racial and social inequality and the exploitation

of labor. Jacobs uses the discourse of sexuality and maternity to politicize domestic ideology. She speaks from the vantage point of those who are already embedded in this discourse; Crafts stands outside of the discourse, and refuses to enter into it. In addition, while Jacobs interrogates this discourse by highlighting the way in which its presence in her life undermines her autonomy, Crafts is intent on not entering into it in order to preserve what little autonomy she does have. Thus, it is more the absence than the presence of this discourse and Crafts' determination not to create it while still enslaved that characterizes *The Bondswoman's Narrative*.

When, in her narrative, the childless Crafts is contrasted with other female slaves who are mothers, the way in which sexuality and maternity complicate and increase the difficulties of the female slave experience is brought even more clearly into focus. This is illustrated in the Lily chapters, in which the lives of the Cosgroves, the new owners of the Lindendale plantation are detailed. The lasciviousness of Mr. Cosgrove results in his siring of several children by his slave mistresses during his wife's absence from the plantation. Upon her return, she discovers her husband's activities and demands that he sell the slaves along with their offspring. To appease his wife, Cosgrove consents to her wishes. Upon being informed that they will be sold, one of his concubines, wild with anger, murders her infant child and then commits suicide in a fit of passion. Not only does this sensational scene emphasize the power that the white male slaveholder exercised over his female slaves, it is also a physical manifestation of the potential genocide that may result from Crafts' argument that slaves resist slavery by curtailing their reproduction.

Although Cosgrove is presented as benevolent and indulgent in his treatment of his slaves, his behavior is no less oppressive than that of Flint in Wilson's narrative. His violation of his female slaves is highlighted in another related incident in which Cosgrove conceals one of his

concubines in a hidden section of his mansion. She is discovered by his wife in his absence and turned off the estate with two infants. The vulnerability of this female slave is reflected in the fact that she is described as “only a large child.” When confronted by Mrs. Cosgrove, she responds that she while she was favored by her master, “she couldn’t help it” (180-81). She is then given her freedom by Mrs. Cosgrove and ordered to leave the plantation. She is described as “toiling up the hill” literally burdened with her “onerous maternal duty” (183). Mrs. Cosgrove also suffers physical abuse at the hands of her husband. This occurs after she follows him to a cottage where he appears to have stowed the dismissed Emily and possibly his other concubines. Mrs. Cosgrove is struck by her husband while on her horse, the horse panics, bolts and she suffers fatal injuries.

These episodes also highlight that the white woman, although complicit in the black woman’s oppression, was also a victim of the white male patriarchal power structure. As Jones asserts, “... the system of bondage ultimately involved the subordination of all women, both black and white, to masters-husbands whose behavior ranged from benevolent to tyrannical, but always within a patriarchal context” (26). Discussing the way both black and white women were negatively affected by slavery, and pitted one against the other, Jones notes that

... jealousy over their spouse’s real or suspected infidelity led many white wives to openly express their anger and shame. Husbands who flaunted their activities in the slave quarters essentially dared their wives to attack a specific woman or her offspring. Some promiscuous husbands made no attempts at gentlemanly discretion (or “transcendent silence”) within their own households, but rather actively sought to antagonize their wives. (26)

Jones also notes that “scattered evidence” indicates that wives were sometimes subjected to physical abuse from their husbands: while this was not the norm, it no doubt resulted from the surrounding culture of violence (25-27). Crafts’ narrative clearly details the way in which the white male’s sexual abuse of his slaves affects the relationship between the white mistress and her black slaves and “[ruins]” the “domestic peace” of the white couple. In this way, *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* reveals that the institutions of marriage and the family are not only devalued in the slave community but also in white society. In so doing, Crafts undermines the genre of sentimental fiction.

Through the characters of Mrs. Cosgrove and Mrs. Wheeler, Crafts also undermines this genre by interrogating the convention of true womanhood. She notes that in her rage at her husband’s infidelity, Mrs. Cosgrove “more resembled a Fury of Orestes than a Christian woman” (181). Far from the passive, dutiful and long suffering traits that the heroine of sentimental fiction was supposed to embody, Mrs. Cosgrove is depicted as willful, vain, and proud. Mrs. Wheeler, who becomes Crafts’ mistress later in the narrative, is also another character who is used to undermine the tropes of white domestic gentility and true womanhood perpetuated by sentimental literature. Mrs. Wheeler indicates the way in which the white woman is also corrupted by power. She is portrayed as vain, proud, duplicitous and demanding. In highlighting her situation as the domestic slave of a “hard mistress,” Crafts details her mistress’s whims and fancies, characterizes her as “a spoiled child” and notes that she:

never felt so poor, so weak, so utterly subjected to the authority of another, as when that woman with her soft voice and suavity of manner, yet withal so stern and inflexible told me that I was hers body and soul, and that she did and would exact obedience in all cases and under all circumstances. (153-54)

Crafts, therefore, simultaneously demonstrates that slavery is antithetical to the development of the traits of true womanhood, and that white society itself is made corrupt by the peculiar institution.

Crafts also undermines the tropes of sentimental fiction by abandoning it in favor of the genre of social realism. Robbins notes that as the narrative progresses, the narrator abandons the earlier sentimentality and resorts to social realism (75). Thus, like Prince's narrative that initially makes use of tropes of sentimental fiction and then abandons them in favor of a more literal description of slave life, Crafts also abandons this genre and resorts to literal descriptions that reflect the stark reality of the slave experience. Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in the description of the Wheelers' plantation. In addition to highlighting the way the institutions of womanhood, marriage, motherhood and the family, which are so highly prized in white genteel society, are debased in slave society and ironically in white society itself, Crafts' description of the Wheelers' plantation also underscores the gross inequality that slavery engenders.

The squalor, overcrowding, and utter wretchedness of the slave huts on the Wheelers' plantation is juxtaposed with the grandeur of the plantation house. The description of the squalid conditions in which the slaves live is preceded by a description of "the luxurious abundance" of the vegetation on the plantation. This profusion of vegetable luxury is, quite literally, the fruit of the labor of the slaves and can be read as a metaphor for the way in which the wealth of the plantocracy has been attained. Noting that, "the labor of many slaves was required to keep such a large estate in thrifty order," (199) Crafts then describes the huts and the slaves who inhabit them in the starkest of terms. Critics such as Adebayo Williams have interpreted this depiction as a sign of the narrator's snobbery and elitism. Describing her depiction as "savage," Williams

maintains that she succeeds, “in stripping the black slaves of the last shred of their humanity” (146-47). While the argument can be made that Crafts seems to have internalized some of the very elitist notions that she criticizes, Williams conflates her description of the physical and mental degradation of these slaves with her opinions of them. He also interprets the disparity in living conditions between house and field slave that Crafts describes as a sign of her class snobbery and sense of superiority. Such a reading ignores the fact that Crafts uses this description to establish and question the social hierarchy created by slavery.

Commenting on the inhabitants of the slave huts on the Wheelers’ plantation, she states, “if a head gets bruised or a limb broken, heads and limbs are so plentiful that they seem of small account” (200). This indicates a paradox of slavery - as valuable as slaves were to their owners, they were also expendable. This irony results from the fact that their surplus value, which is in large part derived from their reproductive capabilities, is so high that their individual value is depreciated. Thus the wealth that slaves create for their owners makes it easier for slaveholders to replace slaves who perish. In this way, they ironically contribute to their own exploitation and further degradation. Crafts’ metonymic description of the slaves as fragmented into “heads and limbs” depersonalizes their bodies and emphasizes their dissociation and alienation; a fact which Crafts develops when she compares their treatment to that of the domestic animals. She also highlights their estrangement from their surroundings noting that these slaves “live in a world of civilization and, elegance, and refinement, and yet know nothing about either” (sic 201). This description thus underscores the objectification and commodification which slaves experience under slavery. Crafts herself makes this objectification explicit when she refers to them as a “promiscuous [crowd] of dirty, obscene and degraded objects” (207). Thus rather than seek to

establish the humanity of the slaves, Crafts emphasizes their dehumanization to highlight the results of the economic exploitation that slavery engenders.

She deliberately includes this description of the field slaves to underscore in the clearest way, not only the physical and emotional suffering of slavery, but the utter deprivation and depravity which it no doubt led to in some of its victims. By preceding the description of the deplorable conditions in which the slaves live with a description of the luxury of the Wheelers' abode, and following it with a condemnation of the slave system, Crafts cements her critique of not only slavery but also the gross inequality that it promotes. After contrasting the Wheelers with the destitute slaves, in the longest invective in the novel, she condemns this racial and class inequality, stating, "this is the result of that false system which bestows on position, wealth, or power the consideration due only to a man" (200). This is followed by a discussion of the hereditary nature of slavery in which the huts are presented as symbols of the role that slave labor played in the creation of the nation. She notes that many of these huts "were even older than the nation, and had been occupied by successive generations of slaves" (200).

This illustrates that the commodification of blacks becomes naturalized, as they become property, passed from one generation to another; a fact highlighted by Jefferson in Query XIV and condemned by David Walker in his "Appeal" in a direct refutation of Jefferson's document. Walker repeatedly notes that blacks are kept in servitude to whites in order to "dig their mines and work their farms; and thus go on enriching them, from one generation to another with our blood and our tears" (Article I np). Regarding Walker's "Appeal," Lerone Bennett Jr. notes that "although Walker wrote out of a religious framework, he identified the primary problem as economic exploitation" and developed the idea that slavery rested on white greed (75). Walker's sentiments were echoed by other members of the early Black Nationalist movement such as

Prince Hall. Bennett notes that Prince Hall, speaking at the turn of the eighteenth century also “[demanded] for black men not only freedom but the full credentials for citizenship: social, political and economic equality” (38). However, in many slave narratives, the notion of economic equality seems to have been sublimated into the focus on racial equality. This is not so in *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* where the focus is placed on both the racial and class inequality perpetrated by slavery.

The sentiments of early anti-slavery advocates such as Walker are echoed almost verbatim in the opening pages of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* in which Crafts questions elitist notions by interrogating the racial and social hierarchy upon which slavery rests. In the opening pages of the novel, Crafts asserts that the slave children although “doomed to a life of toil and drudgery ... evinced their equal origin” (11). In so doing, she establishes an idea which is reiterated throughout the remainder of the narrative. The idea is developed that the disparity between the material and social reality of planter and slave is directly proportional, that is, the wealth of the former rests on the horrific suffering and utter dispossession of the latter. In this way, the narrative underscores the necessity of a system that promotes equal economic opportunity and asserts the equality of all by, ironically, highlighting the inequality engendered by slavery. The idea is developed that emancipation should be accompanied by an examination of the class and social hierarchy that promotes such gross inequality.

When Crafts, therefore, describes the effects of the “degradation, neglect and ill treatment” (200) on these slaves and contends that, “the Constitution that asserts the right of freedom and equality to all mankind is a sealed book to them,” (201) she continues to develop the theme of social and economic exploitation that she introduced in the opening pages of the narrative and returns to repeatedly throughout her writing. It is clear that freedom and equality

are concepts that Crafts values equally. While it can be argued that Crafts' "voice" distinguishes her from the masses of slaves and demonstrates that she sees herself as a class above the common slaves – a fact that indicates that she has imbibed the elitism that she condemns – to view Crafts' depiction of slave life on the Wheeler plantation solely as a manifestation of elitist pride is to obscure the fact that this description allows her to powerfully challenge the racism and inequality engendered by slavery in a way that is perhaps unprecedented in the literature of the slave narrative. Thus, far from gleefully and spitefully stripping these slaves of their humanity as Williams would have us believe, Crafts acknowledges it and shows the extent to which it has been degraded by the inhumane system of slavery, a fact that Williams himself acknowledges when he asserts that the novel is, "a devastating dissection of the iniquities of the peculiar institution, and a coruscating assault on the inequities of American society" (146).

This description also highlights the intertextuality of *The Bondwoman's Narrative* with Dickens's *Bleak House*. In the same way that Dickens used his novel to draw attention to the social conditions of the London poor, Crafts uses this description to highlight the social inequality that slavery fosters. Hollis Robbins notes that Dickens's novel was very popular in the 1850s in America among both black and white writers. She further notes that abolitionists drew parallels between the social situations depicted in the novel and the situation in America (73-74). Crafts is one such writer who no doubt saw a direct connection between the desperate social conditions of the poor of London and the dispossession of the slaves in America. Noting that Crafts' description of the slave huts draws on Dickens's description of "a squalid London alley .... [a] borrowing which proposes a kinship of suffering, of squalor, of subjugation, of servitude," (81). Robbins suggests that, "Hannah Crafts ... might be seen as a writer grappling with a tradition of writing movingly about the poor and powerless" (74). She then goes on to

wonder if Crafts can be considered “a proto-Marxist who has performed the rhetorical act of uniting workers of the world who had little to lose but their chains” (82).

It is not unlikely that abolitionists in the United States were exposed to or perhaps even influenced by Marxist philosophy, and that Crafts herself may have been exposed to Marxist views. August H. Nimtz Jr., in his book, *Marx, Tocqueville, and Race in America*, argues that Marx wrote about social inequality in the United States and commented on the contradiction between slavery and the professed ideals of American democracy (48). These are sentiments which are echoed in Crafts’ narrative and in the anti-slavery literature of the day. The fact that Marx expressed these ideas in the late 1840s and Crafts’ manuscript is thought to have been written anywhere from 1853 to 1861 makes it not altogether impossible that she may have drawn on such ideas. Even if Crafts was not consciously influenced by Marxist ideology, undoubtedly her focus on the inequality of slavery resonates with the Marxist worldview as it relates to labor relations. The connection between slavery and labor exploitation is noted by George M. Fredrickson in his book, *The Arrogance of Race*. Although Frederickson cautions that an overly relentless pursuit of class analysis of slavery would “[underplay] the historical significance of racism,” (4) he notes that the rise of neo-Marxian “class analysis . . . has drawn attention to the fact that slavery was preeminently a labor system and that its abolition required a massive readjustment of the relations between workers and those who owned the means of production” (3-4). Crafts’ narrative posits a similar philosophy. Implicit in her critique of slavery, is the suggestion that not only should the slaves be freed, but they should also have access to opportunities for material and mental advancement.

Crafts’ “borrowings” from the works of Dickens and others are indicative of her cosmopolitan consciousness. While some slave narrators demonstrated a sense of their

connection to others on the basis of race, Crafts demonstrates a sense of connection to others on the basis of class and a sense of a commonality of human suffering that stems from social injustice. Like Prince, Crafts demonstrates her resistance to the economic exploitation which she faces under slavery by connecting her suffering to the suffering of the poor in other parts of the world. Like Stowe, Crafts also generalizes her condemnation of slavery to “all systems of exploitation” (113). Thus, *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* challenges slavery, racism and class inequality through the theme of the exploitation of labor which runs throughout the narrative. By developing these themes from the uniquely gendered perspective of a female house slave, Crafts adds thematic complexity to an already structurally complex narrative.

## CONCLUSION

Analysis of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Mary Prince* and *The Bondwoman's Narrative* reveals the resistance strategies employed by blacks to fight both slavery and the dehumanization that accompanied the ideological apparatus that sought to justify their economic exploitation. This indicates that they were cognizant of the fact that the economic exploitation that characterized slavery was linked to identity construction. While the male slave contested the construction of the black as sub-human and inferior, female slaves also had to contest what Hillary Beckles refers to as “the social construction of gender in slave society” (11). While Equiano engages in an individualistic pursuit of freedom from oppression, Prince’s and Crafts’ attempts to free themselves from oppression are more rooted in the gender relationships that informed slavery. Equiano achieves a measure of economic autonomy which he uses to purchase his freedom and develops a sophisticated critical consciousness which enables him to directly engage with the ideological discourse that sought to dehumanize him. This sophisticated critical consciousness allows Equiano not only to establish the untenable nature of slavery but also to simultaneously interrogate and undermine many of the imperialist ideas expressed in the anti-slavery literature of British abolitionists.

In contrast to the more active resistance of their male counterpart, Prince and Crafts engage in passive forms of resistance. This stems from the fact that their resistance was complicated by domestic concerns that often confined them to private, domestic spaces and militated against a single minded pursuit of freedom in the public domain. They fought not only against social and economic domination but also against a gender order that was controlled by a patriarchal tradition that viewed the female as inferior. This causes them not only to resist categorizations of blacks as inferior but also to challenge the ideal of white, genteel domesticity

established by the tradition of sentimental literature; and to highlight the ways in which women's "surplus value" is derived from their reproductive capabilities (Baker 50-1). In so doing, they reveal that the institutions of marriage, motherhood, womanhood and the family were debased in the life of the slave. Their determination to evade the maternal narrative indicates that they were fully aware that under slavery, women's experiences were intimately connected to their sexuality and maternity. Thus they sought to avoid these discourses to avoid complicating their situation.

Although their resistance to enslavement is largely passive, both Prince and Crafts present themselves as active agents, who while victimized do not end up victims. In this way, they reflect the point made by Francis Smith Foster in her book *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives* that while slave women have been stereotyped as victims of sexual abuse and "as childless mothers," their own writings often counter this stereotype (xxix-xxx). She maintains that although these narratives document the traumatic effects of sexual and physical exploitation, they often do not revolve around these experiences. Many female narrators opt instead to celebrate their escape from slavery and their eagerness to enjoy freedom. This indicates that they saw themselves as much more than victims in that they emphasize their resistance to oppression rather than the oppression itself (xxxiii-xxxiv).

That Prince and Crafts both eventually marry indicates that they crave domestic stability. That Equiano also settles down into marriage and family life indicates that he too, like his female counterparts, also values domestic stability. Unlike his female counterparts, however, his experiences are not circumscribed by the maternal narrative that sought to bind the female slave to her "biological destiny" in an effort to produce "surplus value" for the capitalist interests for whom she was property. This study thus demonstrates that gender conditioned the response of slave men and women to slavery. The female narratives, in giving voice to the experiences of

their protagonists, can be considered forerunners to later slave narratives and contemporary narratives that seek to privilege the maternal narrative and the contribution of the black woman to the struggle for liberation. In illustrating the efforts that slave women made to resist this devaluation of the “female” and in the process voice their overall resistance to enslavement, they foreshadow the way in which this contribution would later be devalued by sexist attitudes, both in the dominant society and in the black community itself.

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