NINETEENTH CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

ISSUE 16.2 (Summer 2020)

The History of Mary Prince and the Racial Formation of Rape Culture

By Anna Feuerstein, University of Hawaiʻi-Mānoa

> “to hang me up by the wrists and lay my flesh open with the cow-skin, was an ordinary punishment for even a slight offence.”—Mary Prince

> “Being enslaved was not only a condition characterized by vulnerability to sexual assault—it was always already a condition of sexual violation.”—Walter Johnson

<1>When I first read Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740) as an undergraduate, I found it erotic. Weird, certainly, but the fact that such a *foundational* British novel was so blatantly about sexual desire was, to me, fascinating. Yes, the novel was a bit “rapey,” but certainly Richardson didn’t have rape in mind when he wrote a novel that would eventually be preached from the pulpit as an exemplary illustration of female virtue. Right? Learning about *Pamela*’s importance to the development of the British novel only added fuel to my fire. Ground-breaking for its epistolary form and portrayal of detailed female subjectivity, the novel is characterized as formative to the rise of the novel and to the development of middle-class subjectivity.<1> The fact that such a bizarrely sexual novel was so important to literary history thrilled me as an undergraduate, giving me a profound love for the text and all the elements of its historical context—the pulpit! the conduct manuals! anti-Pamela!—that make it so rich.

<2>My excitement about the eroticism of *Pamela* waned when I first taught it. With a group of mostly young women in front of me, I wondered if any of them had been sexually assaulted, and if so, how they would feel about the novel. Even if they hadn’t experienced that trauma, how many would simply find the novel distressing? I realized I had more work to do beyond taking students through the novel, giving them historical context, and talking about its importance in the development of Western literature. I had to warn them that this was a novel about sexual assault, perpetuating rape culture so stealthily that generations of readers would never have recognized it as such. The second time I taught the novel, I gave students a handout with contemporary examples of rape culture that we discussed in relationship to *Pamela*, female virtue, and Eliza Haywood’s *Love in Excess* (1719), which we read earlier in the semester.<2> To read *Pamela* as a product of rape culture shifted how we discussed the novel and constructions of female virtue. It also changed our reading of the conduct manual we read alongside it; instead of reading *The Whole Duty of a Woman* (1737) as policing female sexuality, we understood it as inscribing young women within rape culture. If they were raped, they were asking for it. Reading *Pamela* as complicit with rape culture gave us contemporary language for working through all the problems with female virtue, and helped us see how rape culture worked its way into major cultural productions. This reframing of “the old stuff” was productive to our class, and important

©Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies, Edited by Stacey Floyd and Melissa Purdue

to my students; so much so that one student noted in their course evaluation that I “took the time to pay special attention to things that need to be taught in school—i.e. rape culture.”

<3>What are the implications of taking seriously the fact that *Pamela*—a text deemed foundational to the British novel—is embedded within rape culture and perpetuates it? That the way we think about female subjectivity in the novel goes back to a young woman trying desperately to avoid getting raped by a powerful man? That she was so terrified and traumatized that she started seeing things? That our treasured triple-deckers may indeed be products—and producers—of rape culture? If in *Pamela* and other early novels like *Love in Excess*, where else is rape culture lurking in our literary traditions?<3> And if so embedded within our literary traditions, what is our responsibility, as teachers and scholars, to raise awareness of it?

<4>We can find some surprising similarities to *Pamela* in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Jacobs, a young virtuous woman, tries desperately to avoid being sexually assaulted by a powerful man. Written in the first person, like *Pamela*, it closely follows the psychological effects of the threat of rape. Yet the differences cannot be ignored: Jacobs was enslaved, Pamela was not. Pamela was a white servant trying to avoid rape, whereas Harriet was an enslaved black woman who managed to avoid the fate that befell many. Whereas Pamela ends up married to the rich aristocrat who assaulted her, Jacobs forms a relationship with another white man for protection, spends seven years hiding in an attic, and finds (a precarious) freedom only when she escapes to the North. Thus while comparisons between these texts highlight the pervasiveness of rape culture, the differences emphasize the importance of taking seriously how rape culture helps form social and cultural conceptions of race. For if *Pamela*, written by a white man, perpetuates rape culture and the production of white bourgeois femininity, *Incidents*, written by a formerly enslaved woman, is both a product of rape culture *and* a critique of its racialized logics, such as virtue. As Saidiya Hartman argues, *Incidents* reveals that if “virtue designates a racial entitlement not accorded to the enslaved, then consent is nullified not only on the grounds of one’s civil status but also on the basis of presumed sexual predilections, which in the case of slave women come to be defined by default” (*Scenes* 105). The hegemony of (white) virtue that Pamela was obsessed with thus looked wildly different within the context of slavery. Following Shannon Block, we can see that “[r]ape’s imbrication in multiple strands of history, discourse, and popular culture makes rape both transhistoric and culturally specific” (7). If rape culture has a literary history, it is a complicated one, demanding care and nuance in its illumination. And if rape racializes, then we must similarly teach rape culture within these racial contexts.

<5>While Jacobs’s *Incidents* is open about sexual assault—so much so that the text’s editor, Lydia Marie Child, warned readers that “many will accuse me of indecorum for presenting these pages to the public; for the experiences of this intelligent and much-injured woman belong to a class which some call delicate subjects, and others indelicate” (5-6)—*The History of Mary Prince* (1831) ostensibly makes only veiled references to slavery’s rape culture. Whereas the entirety of *Pamela* is evidence for attempted rape, little appears in *Mary Prince*. Yet given the prevalence of rape among enslaved women, it’s likely Mary was a victim.<4> In many ways Mary’s elision of sexual assault marks another element of rape culture: women must tread carefully when relating their stories of sexual assault. For Mary’s narrative was not only regulated by the British abolition movement—reluctant to offend young women’s ears over

lascivious acts, and eager to present enslaved women with good moral character—but it also came under attack for libel, causing a public debate over the text's, and thus Mary's, believability. Framed by the voice of a white male abolitionist, *Mary Prince* highlights the many layers of early nineteenth-century rape culture, especially as they function as a means of racialization. For what we take as evidence of sexual assault is different for Pamela than it is for Jacobs and Mary; whereas Pamela has a plethora of evidence in the shape of a novel, on the surface there is little for Mary. And significantly, what *counts* as evidence for Pamela is not the same as what counts for enslaved women.

<6>This essay traces the literary and cultural history of rape culture in *The History of Mary Prince*, demonstrating the relationship between rape culture and racial formation. By rape culture I mean the tendency to normalize sexual violence, blame women and excuse men, and perpetuate sexual stereotypes that contribute to violence against women. Mostly, I focus on evidence for or against sexual assault, and how the search for evidence—and different kinds of evidence—illuminates the particular ways that slavery's rape culture ungenders women, reducing them to what Hortense Spillers calls "flesh," the "zero degree of social conceptualization" (67). The desire to find evidence and the discounting of evidence are, I suggest, both elements of rape culture that work in nuanced ways within the context of slavery. Following Alexander Weheliye's recent language, I classify slavery's rape culture as a "racializing assemblage" that "construes race not as a biological or cultural classification but as a set of sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans" (4). These racializing assemblages ultimately help form a society's conception of race. As such, slavery's rape culture was a racializing assemblage composed of cultural beliefs, laws, and institutions that worked together to mark enslaved women as flesh and less-than-human.

<7>First, I discuss how to read for sexual assault in a narrative controlled by the mores of the abolition movement. Whereas scholars suggest there is little evidence of rape in Mary's narrative, I suggest that it is actually all over the text, and particularly highlighted in the sexualized floggings she receives. I next examine the layers of the text, such as Thomas Pringle's framing, the libel trial, and the abolitionist movement, to suggest Mary's sexuality—and thus her character—was on trial from the moment she spoke her history. Not only did her testimony need verification by white men, but the slavocracy used her sexuality as evidence for why her story should not be believed. Through examining the linkage of sexuality and ungendering, I show how for enslaved women, rape was dispersed, and precluded the direct evidence that would work for white women. It was precisely their ungendering – at the hands of both white men and women – that normalized sexual violence against enslaved women, and created on ontological distinction between white and black women. Ultimately, rape culture, and its function as a means of racialization, is part of the afterlife of slavery; ignoring this manifestation of slavery's afterlife is another means of perpetuating the white supremacy that nurtured slavery in the first place.<5>

Text

<8>As we learn in her narrative, Mary Prince was born in Bermuda, an isolated, self-governing British colony, in 1788, to an enslaved mother and father. After the death of Sarah Darrell Williams, her owner's mother, she was put up for auction at the age of twelve, alongside her sisters, to help pay for a wedding. She was sold to the brutal Captain John and Mary Ingham and lived with them for five years, after which she was sold to Mr. D, and taken to Turk's Island to

©Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies, Edited by Stacey Floyd and Melissa Purdue

work in the salt mines. She returned to Bermuda with Mr. D in 1810, and five years later convinced him to sell her to John Wood, who lived in Antigua. Throughout her time with the Woods, at least three people offered to buy her, including Captain Abbot, a white man with whom she lived for seven years, but the Woods refused to sell her. In Antigua, she joined the Moravian church, and in 1826 married, without her owner's consent, Daniel James, a free black man. In 1828, Mary traveled with the Woods to England, in the hopes of curing her rheumatism. However, fed up with their treatment of her when she arrived, she left them shortly after, as she was allowed to do under English law. She wanted to go back to her husband, but not as a slave. After getting help from the Moravians, she eventually approached London's Anti-Slavery Society, where she met the society's secretary, Thomas Pringle. She lived and worked in his house as a domestic servant, and it was here that she narrated her story to Suzanna Strickland. The text was published in 1831, and caused two libel trials in 1833. The first was brought against *Blackwood's Magazine* by Thomas Pringle, for an article it published questioning the text's authenticity. Pringle was in turn sued by John Wood for defamation. We know nothing of what happened to Mary after the trial.

<9>There are numerous difficulties involved in discussing sexual assault in slave narratives and writing about the lives of enslaved persons more generally. Most involve the limits of the archive, the dearth of evidence, and the fact that the voices we have are often filtered, coming from abolitionist propaganda or the slavocracy. This lack underscores the precarious lives of enslaved persons; as Marisa Fuentes argues, there is a danger in the "very call to 'find more sources'" about the enslaved, those who were unable to leave records due to the violence they experienced (6). Another problem consists of representation itself: Hartman warns us that representing assaults, such as the flogging of naked bodies, risks "replicating the grammar of violence" ("Venus" 4), falling into a titillating pornotrope that ensures the violated body is continually exposed, and "immure[s] us to pain by virtue of their familiarity" (*Scenes* 3). In "Venus in Two Acts," Hartman elaborates on the near impossibility of knowing the stories of women violated by slavery, and offers a writing practice called "critical fabulation." This involves "laboring to paint as full a picture of the lives of the captives as possible. This double gesture can be described as straining against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the captive, and, at the same time, enacting the impossibility of representing the lives of the captives precisely through the process of narration" (11). The goal is to "make visible the production of disposable lives" and "listen for the mutters and oaths and cries of the commodity" (11, 12). Importantly this does not mean we simply fill in the gaps and make up a woman's story. It involves "[n]arrative restraint" and "respect" of "black noise"—"the shrieks, the moans, the nonsense, and the opacity" (12). The goal is not to "*give voice* to the slave, but rather to imagine what cannot be verified" (12). This practice is imperative when trying to understand how slavery's rape culture worked as a means of racialization, especially given the limited evidence within the archives.

<10>If we are looking for direct evidence of sexual assault in Mary's narrative, there isn't much. In her introduction to *The History of Mary Prince*, Moira Ferguson practices critical fabulation, as she tries to imagine what else could have happened in Mary's life, especially in terms of sexual assault. She reads for moments where Mary may be trying to say what she cannot due to the constraints of abolitionist discourse and nineteenth-century codes of female virtue. Ferguson suggests that Mary "foils" sexual abuse through "encoding her abusive sexual experiences in

©Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies, Edited by Stacey Floyd and Melissa Purdue

accounts of angry jealous mistresses" (4). Given that this is a common trope within American slave narratives—Harriet Jacobs, for example, recounts Mrs. Flint's cruel behavior to her once she realizes her husband is trying to assault her—this is a useful way to read the many beatings she receives from white women.<6> Mary never explicitly states she was raped, yet there is one scene that suggests she was. She explains how once she came back to Bermuda with Mr. D, "He had an ugly fashion of stripping himself quite naked, and ordering me then to wash him in a tub of water. This was worse to me than all the licks" (24). After beating her for breaking some plates, she told him "he was a very indecent man—very spiteful, and too indecent; with no shame for his servants, no shame for his flesh" (24). The most telling aspect of this scene is Mary's reaction: she can better bear the physical violence that has torn her flesh than the interaction with Mr. D's naked body. Indeed, it seems incredibly unlikely that these episodes did not move beyond washing. We see only two other moments of possible sexual assault in the narrative, but they are not about Mary. We can say with near certainty that Hetty was raped by Mr. Ingham and carries his child (indeed, she is so overworked, how could she have time to carry on with someone else?). And a footnote from Pringle explains that Mary's sister "had several children to her master" (23).

<11>I suggest that the many moments of flogging naked bodies in Mary's narrative are distinct moments of sexual assault that highlight how slavery's rape culture "*chequered*" white supremacy upon the bodies of enslaved women (*History* 64).<7> Following Spillers and Weheliye, we can read the strippings and whippings of Prince's body as pornotroping—"the enactment of black suffering for a shocked and titillated audience"—which "unconceals the literally bare, naked, and denuded dimensions of bare life, underscoring how political domination frequently produces a sexual dimension that cannot be controlled by the forces that (re)produce it" (Weheliye 90).<8> These moments highlight how slavery reduces the body from liberal subject position (one who is free) to "flesh," persons without legal recourse who are deprived of humanity (Spillers 67). Being made flesh is also a process of "ungendering," which for enslaved women functions most forcefully through slavery's rape culture. For Spillers, the originary moment of this ungendering occurs during the Middle Passage, but Mary has her own originary moment of enfleshment that emerges from a simultaneous dehumanization and sexualization. When she is put up for sale at twelve years old, she explains that the vendue master

> took me by the hand, and led me out into the middle of the street, and, turning me slowly round, exposed me to the view of those who attended the vendue. I was soon surrounded by strange men, who examined and handled me in the same manner that a butcher would a calf or a lamb he was about to purchase, and who talked about my shape and size in like words – as if I could no more understand their meaning than the dumb beasts. (11)

Here Mary is primed for her entrance into slavery's rape culture. The way she describes the men handling her body—she is turned around and "exposed," "examined," and "handled"—and talking about her body, foreshadows the exposure and handling enslaved women suffered at the hands of numerous men. The scene shows the production of turning a young woman into flesh: she is broken down into parts, like an animal you would evaluate for meat; she is "exposed" and handled by a man she doesn't know, and presumably by those who may buy her; she is for sale for any purpose; and this is all sanctioned by law.

©Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies, Edited by Stacey Floyd and Melissa Purdue

<12>While the vendue scene marks Mary becoming flesh, the floggings she receives show the literal effects of this transformation. Historical accounts of slavery are rife with images of stripped bodies, both in slave narratives and abolitionist writings. These images appear frequently in Mary's narrative, and highlight how her body was constantly violated through physical beatings and the exposure of her naked flesh. Stephanie Jones-Rogers explains that many historians categorize these violent whippings as "sexually violent events," even though they were not recognized as such by law (111). Further, Walter Johnson, who contends that even young children running around with their genitals exposed is a sexual violation, emphasizes that "[b]eing enslaved was not only a condition characterized by vulnerability to sexual assault—it was always already a condition of sexual violation" (195). And indeed, Mary says as much at the end of her narrative: "Is it happiness for a driver in the field to take down his wife or sister or child, and strip them, and whip them in such a disgraceful manner?—women that have had children exposed in the open field to shame! There is no modesty or decency shown by the owner to his slaves; men, women, and children are exposed alike" (37). Thus it is surprising that Ferguson does not classify these many episodes of being stripped and flogged as sexual assault. Certainly these are more than "subtle" suggestions about "her daily vulnerability to sexual harassment" (Ferguson 15).

<13>For when we look more closely at the floggings, we see naked bodies *all over this text*: sexual violation becomes dispersed as part of the routine of slavery. The similarity among Mary's descriptions emphasizes how these beatings are routine: Mrs. Ingham "caused me to know the exact difference between the smart of the rope, the cart-whip, and the cow-skin, when applied to my naked body by her own cruel hand" (14), for, to "strip me naked—to hang me up by the wrists and lay my flesh open with the cow-skin, was an ordinary punishment for even a slight offence" (15); Mrs. Ingham "stripped and flogged me long and severely with the cow-skin; as long as she had strength to use the lash" (16). The language is the same with Mr. D, who "has often stripped me naked, hung me up by the wrists, and beat me with the cow-skin, with his own hand, till my body was raw with gashes" (20), and the Woods: "Mrs Wood told me that if I did not mind what I was about, she would get my master to strip me and give me fifty lashes" (26). Mary also witnesses this treatment with other slaves, most egregiously Hetty, who is "stripped quite naked, notwithstanding her pregnancy, and … tied up to a tree in the yard" (15). Mary's description of being flogged—the whippings "lay my flesh open"—highlights how these often public violations reduced the body to flesh in Spiller's distinction, for Mary has no legal recourse or protection, and emphasizes that her body *is not her own*: her flesh is "open" for her owners to do with as they wish, and for others to voyeuristically see. This violent opening of her flesh emphasizes the grotesque physical violence at the heart of slavery's rape culture, one that white women never experienced. This openness of Prince's flesh works ontologically, as it opens her up to the dehumanizing practices of an institution that disallows her access to the human, allowing her to be stripped, flogged, and raped whenever and wherever.

<14>Significantly, the language Mary uses to refer to the floggings is explicitly sexual and sadistic. Thirteen times throughout her narrative Mary uses the word "lick," "licks," or "licking" to refer to floggings. Weheliye suggests this language "links the sensation of taste qua erotics ('their pleasure') to the whipping of slaves" (169), but I would take this further to suggest it emphasizes how these moments are not only explicitly sexual, but explicitly sadistic as well. The one who whips—who licks—gains pleasure from the pain caused by such lickings. Just think of

©Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies, Edited by Stacey Floyd and Melissa Purdue

all the whippings and lickings found throughout Sade's writings. The language of licking suggests an intimacy one would have only with their lover; such "monstrous intimacy" only further emphasizes the sexual nature of the floggings.<9> Indeed, one scene in particular reads like a sex act: Mr. Ingham "tied me up upon a ladder, and gave me a hundred lashes with his own hand…. When he had licked me for some time he sat down to take breath; then after resting, he beat me again and again, until he was quite wearied, and so hot (for the weather was very sultry), that he sank back in his chair, almost like to faint" (17). Mary's emphasis on repetition—"he beat me again and again"—next to Ingham's exhaustion could not be any more sexual. When we consider historical definitions of licking, the ontological implications of slavery's licks become even more clear. Through all the resonances of the word "lick"—to taste, destroy, annihilate, slice off, overcome, get the better of, defeat thoroughly—Mary's humanity and bodily autonomy are removed, annihilated; she is made flesh, her gender gone.<10> Through the licks, the slave owners—both men and women—defeat Mary, get the better of her, and reinforce the racial hierarchies of Western humanism. The evidence for rape is licked clean off her; her body turned into flesh prevents recourse to the law. It's as if the law itself has been scratched, removed, licked off Mary's body.

<15>These scenes become even more harrowing when we use critical fabulation to imagine what Prince doesn't describe, or "what cannot be verified" (Hartman, "Venus" 12). We don't even need Mary's evidence to contemplate what else could have happened. Who was watching? For how long was her naked body exposed, and how many people saw it? What else happened to it while it was bound? And how does the silence—the fact that Mary does not tell us—delineate the pervasiveness of slavery's rape culture? As William Andrews reminds us, "When we find a gap in a slave narrator's objective reportage of the facts of slavery, or a lapse in his [or her] prepossessing self-image, we must pay special attention. These deviations may indicate … a deliberate effort by the narrator to grapple with aspects of his or her personality that have been repressed out of deference to or fear of the dominant culture" (8). It certainly doesn't mean there is no evidence. We know that Mr. D. was particularly voyeuristic with these beatings; as Mary describes, "He would stand by and give orders for a slave to be cruelly whipped, and assist in the punishment, without moving a muscle of his face; walking about and taking snuff with the greatest composure" (20). Were there others who would act similarly, taking sadistic pleasure in the naked body of a woman tied, flogged, and "licked"? What did they gain besides a grotesque enactment of their own power, a means to physically inscribe black bodies with white supremacy? Dawn Harris explains that the punishment of enslaved persons in Barbados and Jamaica, both before and after abolition, instilled white people with a sense of personhood, and "formed a core part of the process whereby the enslaved were differentiated from the colonialists" (20). Thus the "punishment" Mary so often receives literally and ontologically marks her flesh as black, and the bodies of her owners as white. It marks how the exposure and beating of enslaved women was a form of sexual assault *particular* to black women, ungendering them through enacting white supremacy upon their very bodies. It *chequered* them with an aspect of rape culture white women would never experience, one which contributed to what Zakiyah Jackson characterizes as a "*plasticization of humanity*" (117). Not quite made animal, yet not totally dehumanized, these floggings place enslaved women in a space of undefinability, a position somewhere between animal and nonhuman, not-quite-human and certainly not human like white women.

©Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies, Edited by Stacey Floyd and Melissa Purdue

<16>The fact that many of these floggings were done by white women shows that white women were complicit with slavery's rape culture, contributed to its strategies of racialization, and thereby established an ontological distinction between themselves and black women. While reading both Mrs. Ingham and Mrs. Wood as a "jealous mistress" shows how one kind of sexual assault can lead to another, and how enslaved women were vulnerable to assault by both men and women, we can perhaps more productively take the fact that *we don't know* as part of the larger unmooring of Mary's humanity and her gender. Indeed, it shows just how "open" her flesh really was. In her discussion of Jacobs's *Incidents*, Spillers reads Mrs. Flint's predatory behavior towards Jacobs as showing a body turned flesh. She writes,

> we might say that Brent [Jacobs], between the lines of her narrative, demarcates a sexuality that is neuter-bound, inasmuch as it represents an open vulnerability to a gigantic sexualized repertoire that may be alternately expressed as male/female. Since the gendered female *exists* for the male, we might suggest that the ungendered female – in an amazing stroke of pansexual potential – might be invaded/raided by another *woman* or man" (77).

Thus to be flesh—to have your flesh laid open—is to have conceptions of Victorian femininity, and the *legal evidence* for sexual assault, stripped away.<11> Within slavery's rape culture, the idealized domestic sphere is a state of exception where enslaved women experience a particularly *ungendered* dehumanization, in which they are not only excluded from Western humanism but from other categories, such as "woman."

Frame

<17>The rise of the #MeToo movement shed new light on trials about rape and sexual assault, showing the pervasiveness of putting the victim on trial. Chanel Miller's recent memoir *Know My Name* (2019), for example, details her sexual assault by Brock Turner, and the trauma she experienced on account of the assault *and* the trial. Questions from Turner's lawyer such as "*When you were dancing, how were you dancing?"* (163); "*Have you ever shotgunned a beer?*" (164); "*Did you have any intention of hooking up with anybody?*" (170); "*you did a lot of partying in college, right?*" (177), and "*You've had blackouts before, right*?" (177) aim to question Miller's ability to tell the truth, suggest she may have "asked for it," and attempt to show her words as unreliable. Indeed, such questions epitomize rape culture, as they discount a woman's evidence. Or, they use the victim's own history as evidence for the rapist's innocence. Mary never went on the witness stand to lock away Mr. D, or to convict any of her other owners for rape or sexual assault. Under the law, she never could have. Yet her words did spur two libel trials, both in which she testified, and which were ultimately about the believability of her narrative. And given the framing of the narrative by Pringle, with a preface validating her words, and a supplement as long as her narrative, we see that Mary's words were on trial even before her story was written down. Like Miller, Mary was ultimately on trial for her character; yet unlike Miller, Mary was overly-sexualized and assumed to be licentious. In this section, I examine the narrative's preface, lengthy supplement, and the historical contexts surrounding Mary's narrative to show how enslaved women were made flesh not only on the plantation or in their owner's home, but publically as well, through trials, abolitionist propaganda, and slave laws. These elements of rape culture's racializing assemblages add another layer to understanding the historical pretext of the #MeToo movement. The debates over the veracity of Mary's evidence, especially that given during the second libel trial in which Wood, her former

owner, sued Pringle for defamation, continued to work toward her enfleshment even in England, where she was ostensibly free.

<18>Pringle's preface is most famously known for his comments about "pruning" Mary's narrative in order to "render it clearly intelligible," placing it in a long line of writings by enslaved persons validated by white people (3). His supplement is read as similarly overbearing, as it is as long as Mary's own narrative. While this framing of slave autobiographies was not uncommon, Pringle's emphasis on Mary's character stands out as excessive. Much contemporary criticism of *The History of Mary Prince* examines Pringle's overbearing voice, exploring the extent to which his "pruning," preface, and supplement call into question Mary's status as a believable subject, or even a real subject we can locate. Indeed, scholars inquire whether we can correctly classify this text as an autobiography.<12> On one level, Pringle's confirmation of the facts of Mary's life was necessary as abolitionists attempted to gain her freedom; at the same time, it suggests Mary's story could *only* be verified by confirmation from white men. In the preface Pringle notes that "After it had been thus written out, I went over the whole, carefully examining her on every fact and circumstance detailed; and in all that relates to her residence in Antigua I had the advantage of being assisted in this scrutiny by Mr. Joseph Phillips, who was a resident in that colony during the same period, and had known her there" (3). In the supplement, readers are assured that after a lengthy trial, both Phillips and Pringle can judge Mary's story as truth. Phillips emphasizes that Mary's narrative "bears in my judgment the genuine stamp of truth and nature" (Pringle 52). And after describing in detail how he kept a "watchful eye" upon Mary, "closely observing her conduct for fourteen months" (54), Pringle explains, "To my judgment the internal evidence of the truth of her narrative appears remarkably strong" (58). What makes this language of judgment and evidence uncomfortable is that it is clearly about Mary's character, *not* the facts of her history, even though Pringle denies this is the case (55). We get a lengthy description of what Pringle observed in his time as Mary's employer, before he gives his "judgment": Mary is "perfectly honest and trustworthy," has "discretion and fidelity," "is careful, industrious, and anxious to do her duty and to give satisfaction," and "[s]he is remarkable for *decency* and *propriety* of conduct—and her *delicacy*, even in trifling minutiae, has been a trait of special remark by the females of my family" (55).

<19>That Mary was "carefully examined" on "every fact and circumstance" shows similarities to Miller's time on the witness stand at Brock Turner's trial, most especially in relationship to her character. Both trials raised the question of whether the woman was a "good" victim, but much more emphasis was put on Mary's sex life. In a letter to Pringle, Wood defends himself against Mary's "charges" by using her relationship with Captain Abbot as a circumstance by which Pringle "may judge of her depravity," a fact Pringle omits from the republished letter "because it is too indecent to appear in a publication likely to be perused by females" (44). And Pringle emphasizes that even if this story *is* true, we can discount it, as Mary most likely cut off the relationship once she became religious (51). Pringle's omission comes directly after Wood's false statement that he "induced her to take a husband," which suggested her sexuality needed to be controlled by the institution of marriage (43). The following shows the extent to which Mary's sexuality is used to undermine her credibility. Wood writes,

> Her moral character is very bad…. I induced her to take a husband, a short time before she left this, by providing a comfortable house in my yard for them, and prohibiting her going out after 10 to 12 o'clock (our bed-time) without special leave. This she considered

©Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies, Edited by Stacey Floyd and Melissa Purdue

> the greatest, and indeed the only, grievance she ever complained of, and all my efforts could not prevent it. In the hopes of inducing her to be steady to her husband, who was a free man, I gave him the house to occupy during our absence; but it appears the attachment was too loose to bind her… (Pringle 43)

There is an important distinction to make here: Wood is not saying that any rape or sexual assault Mary may have experienced is a result of her sexuality, and therefore not rape; he is arguing that her character is so bad, *as evidenced by her sexuality*, that she should not be free. Her sexuality must be contained within the confines of slavery. For "[i]t would be to reward the worst species of ingratitude, and subject myself to insult whenever she came in my way. … she would be a very troublesome character should she come here without any restraint" (Pringle 43). However, when "[b]eing enslaved…was always already a condition of sexual violation," and given the nineteenth-century obsession with good character, we can only read this as an attempt to discount Mary's story via her sexuality and to suggest that *Wood* is the victim, not her (Johnson 195).<13>

<20>In his statement, Wood draws on a long tradition of hyper-sexualizing black women to "blacken" Mary's character, highlighting a foundational aspect of slavery's rape culture (Pringle 49). This hyper-sexualization goes back to some of the earliest accounts of meetings between Europeans and Africans, and ungenders black women by denying them the normative qualities of white femininity, further reducing them to flesh. This hyper-sexualization was an element of how white men came to construct early meanings of blackness, from the first meetings of Europeans and Africans and throughout the institution of slavery.<14> Most often, the characterization was of a licentious sexuality that could corrupt the otherwise sound morals of white men. And significantly, as Hartman argues, "Lasciviousness made unnecessary the protection of rape law, for insatiate black desire presupposed that all sexual intercourse was welcomed, if not pursued" (86). This belief in black female licentiousness was especially prominent in abolition debates, which suggested that enslaved women were "asking for it." Indeed, these characterizations of black women as hyper-sexual and inherently immoral are why, during the period of abolition after the end of the slave trade, abolitionists argued for marriage laws for slaves. Part of the 1823 "amelioration laws" proposed by the British government aimed at making slavery more tolerable in the West Indies. The twelve proposed laws included measures such as requiring religious instruction for slaves, legalizing and protecting slave marriage, preventing the separation of families by sale, allowing slave testimony in court, and and abolishing female flogging ("Progress"). Yet the rationale for slave marriage suggests it was needed to help preserve the character of white men and stem black female licentiousness, rather than halt sexual assault. In other words, abolitionists used the wrong evidence—white male character—to describe slavery's rape culture.

<21>Thus, character was central to the February 27, 1833 trial between Wood and Pringle, in which Wood, Mary's owner in Antigua, sued Pringle for defamation. At the beginning, Wood's letter to the Governor's secretary was described, with the prosecution mentioning Mary's "depravity" three times ("Wood vs. Pringle"). The prosecution's case aimed to show that the Woods always treated Mary with kindness, so they brought in character witnesses such as a doctor, the Wood's eldest daughter, the Archdeacon of Antigua, and a handful of men and women they knew in Antigua. In her own time on the witness stand Mary related many details readers are familiar with, except one: her relationship with Captain Abbot. The *Evening Mail*

©Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies, Edited by Stacey Floyd and Melissa Purdue

account of the trial explains: “She (witness) once lived with a Captain Abbot. The witness was here questioned as to a statement made by the plaintiff in a letter from him to the governor’s secretary, published in the pamphlet, charging her with gross immorality, and she denied the truth of the statement. The history of her life was written down by Miss Strickland at her (witness’s) request; and she told the lady the truth” (“Court” 146-147). We don’t know what she was asked upon cross-examination, but her response reveals more details about her relationship with Captain Abbot, as well as with a free man named Oyskman, with whom she also lived for some time:

> She was married about three years before she came to England. Her husband was a carpenter, a cooper, and a violin-player. The plaintiff gave him leave to live with her. She had lived seven years before with Captain Abbot. She did not live in the house with him, but slept with him sometimes in another hut which she had, in addition to her room in the plaintiff’s yard. One night she found another woman in bed with the Captain in her house. This woman had pretended to be a friend of witness. (Laughter). Witness licked her, and she was obliged to get out of bed. (A laugh). The captain laughed, and the woman said she had done it to plague witness. Witness took her next day to the Moravian black leader, when she denied it, and witness then licked her again. (A laugh). The woman then complained before a magistrate, Mr. Justice Dyett; and when the story was told, they all laughed, and the woman was informed that she must never come there again with such tales, or she would be put into the stocks. . . .
>
> She knew a free man of the name of Oyskman, who made a fool of her by telling her he would make her free. She lived with him for some time, but afterwards discharged him. That was when she first went to Antigua, and Oyskman was the first man who came to court her. . . . She told all this to Miss Strickland when that lady took down her narrative. These statements were not in the narrative published by the defendant. (“Court” 147-148)

<22>Mary was clearly asked for more details about her marriage and relationships with Abbot and Oyskman. The fact that this occured during cross-examination shows that the lawyer for Wood believed this information would be useful in suggesting that she exaggerated or lied in her narrative; if she had these sexual relationships, the logic goes, her evidence is discounted. The bringing in of the complaint to the magistrate Justice Dyett also serves to suggest a larger culture of licentiousness and immorality among the enslaved. And all this evidence was successfully used against her: Pringle had to pay damages to Wood, implying that in a court of law, Mary couldn’t be believed.

<23>Returning to strategies of critical fabulation can help us imagine why Mary may have formed these relationships, while highlighting how the conservatism of the abolition movement contributed to slavery’s rape culture. That Prince told all of these facts to Strickland but they were left out of her narrative adds evidence to the belief that the abolition community would have seen Mary’s sex life as detrimental to her character. Yet it appears that one of these relationships was strategic, even though it is possible both could have been. Her statement that Oyskman “made a fool of her by telling her he would make her free” suggests that Mary may have begun a relationship with him because of this; that if she slept with Oyskman, he would one day buy her freedom. And perhaps her relationship with Abbot was a means of protecting herself against Wood, as was Harriet Jacobs’s relationship with Mr. Sands. If the strategic aspects of

these relationships were known, the abolition community could have better understood how little control enslaved women had over their bodies, or how their bodies were perhaps one of the only means of negotiation they had for protection or freedom. This absence suggests that the rape culture of slavery and abolition would never have taken these reasons as evidence. To be a good victim, Mary had to be "virtuous," something she never could have been within the institution of slavery.

<24>As part of her trial Mary stripped, once again, for white women, in a moment of sympathy that was both violating and re-victimizing. The supplement includes a letter from Mrs. Pringle, in which she describes examining Mary's body; this too was brought into *Wood vs. Pringle.* At the request of Mr. Pringle, who had "a desire to be furnished with some description of the marks of former ill-usage on Mary Prince's person" (64), Prince bared her body to Mrs. Pringle, and again, for "a second inspection" to three other white women (65). This intimate moment was supposed to produce sympathy, yet it was also another moment of pornotroping that shocked and titillated this small audience of sympathetic white women, and those who read Mary's narrative. Mrs. Pringle noted that "the whole of the back part of her body is distinctly scarred" (64); to see "the whole of the back part of her body," Mary would have had to strip down completely. This moment is thus both sexual and hierarchical. For the need of white women to look at Mary's naked body, *to find the evidence* of assault, demonstrates how slavery's rape culture remained bound up in the often problematic project of sympathy, and further contributed to Mary's ungendering. The very act of white women gazing at a *chequered* black body reaffirms Mary's imbrication within a racialized culture of virtue, femininity, and conceptions of sexuality, reinforcing the ontological distinction between white and black women. Significantly, Mrs. Pringle conceives of this moment in terms of testimony: "I beg to add to my own testimony that of Miss Strickland… together with the testimonies of my sister Susan and my Friend Miss Martha Browne," further suggesting the extent to which Mary was on trial, to be judged by white female abolitionists (64-5). Even as a free woman, to be believed she had to lay her flesh open once again.

Conclusion

<25>Teaching a text like *Mary Prince* in the context of #MeToo poses both challenges and possibilities, as the literary history of slavery requires a mode of reading different from reading texts by white writers. For although texts like *Pamela* and *The History of Mary Prince* are connected through the history of rape culture, teaching them requires an acknowledgment and delineation of two different historical contexts. Understanding the limits of the archive and asking students to imagine what could not be said helps us think about how we may better understand the representation—or lack thereof—of sexual assault in nineteenth-century literary history. And given that the demand for direct evidence can itself be part of rape culture, what is at stake when we ask our students to find textual evidence of sexual violence? To help us with such issues, we might consider how Hartman's critical fabulation can help students read for rape culture across multiple narratives while also being cautious about the desire for direct evidence. Critical fabulation can continually highlight difference while showing the limits of the archive: what can and cannot be said within specific historical moments, and why some women's stories are left out. Critical fabulation demonstrates why some archives are more robust than others, and highlights the kinds of power relationships we can locate through seeing what survived and what didn't. Not all rape cultures looked the same, and not all evidence was equal, or equally

©Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies, Edited by Stacey Floyd and Melissa Purdue

demanded.<15> Women's sex lives—both consensual and nonconsensual—were hidden and exposed for different reasons; thus when reading for rape culture in an era when sex was not always blatantly discussed, context is critical. Teaching slavery's rape culture in the wake of #MeToo demands we remain vigilant of slavery's afterlife, not only in how we teach this history, but also in how we understand its relevance today. As Christina Sharpe argues, "to be *in* the wake [of slavery] is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding" (*In the Wake* 13-14). Referring specifically to the "ontological negation" and exclusion that Black subjects face in the U.S., Sharpe emphasizes that living post-slavery does not mean slavery's effects do not linger (14). Rather it demands attention to how the structures that created and allowed for slavery in the first place continue to do their work.

©Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies, Edited by Stacey Floyd and Melissa Purdue

Notes

(1)See Watt; Armstrong.

(2)For my handout I drew from Shannon Ridgway's "25 Everyday Examples of Rape Culture."

(3)In *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America*, Sharon Block identifies seduction narratives as a pivotal aspect of Early-American rape culture: "seduction narratives that made women at least partially responsible for their own ruin contributed to the belief that women could and should control all sexual uses of their bodies" (18).

(4)Following A.M. Rauwerda, I use Mary instead of Prince, as the latter is the name Thomas Pringle, the editor, chose for her (400). As she was married, she should have been called Mary James.

(5)Hartman describes the afterlife of slavery as the fact that "black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago" and notes that it includes elements such as "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment" (*Lose* 6).

(6)That Mary never mentions children does not signify that she was never raped. There were extremely low fertility rates in the British West Indies (Morrissey 101), and many enslaved women in the Caribbean suffered gynecological disorders, limiting pregnancies (Bush 45). On the other hand, Barbara Baumgartner suggests Mary could have been manipulating her fertility (260).

(7)About Mary's back Pringle's wife writes, "the whole of the back part of her body is distinctly scarred, and, as it were, *chequered*, with the vestiges of severe floggings. Besides this, there are many large scars on other parts of her person, exhibiting an appearance as if the flesh had been deeply cut, or lacerated with *gashes*, by some instrument wielded by most unmerciful hands" (64). I will discuss this in more detail below.

(8)In a footnote, Weheliye points to Prince's narrative as an example of pornotroping: "Mary Prince was also no stranger to pornotroping, since nakedness and the pleasure of the sovereign frequently go hand in hand with flogging in her narrative" (169).

(9)Christina Sharpe defines monstrous intimacies as "repetitions of master narratives of violence and forced submission that are read or reinscribed as constant and affection" (*Monstrous* 4).

(10)See the entry for "lick" in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

(11)In most British colonies, slaves were not allowed to give testimony. Or, if they were, it was often only in certain kinds of cases, or needed to be backed up by another witness. This is why as part of the 1823 Amelioration Acts, discussed below, the British government proposed that slaves should be allowed to give testimony.

(12)See, for example, Rauwerda, Jessica Allen, Rachel Banner, and Sarah Salih, "*The History of Mary Prince*, the Black Subject, and the Black Canon."

(13)Pringle himself suggests as much when he writes that slavery is almost worse for white men than for the enslaved (58), desires to protect the name of the Inghams and Mr. D (3-4), and writes of the Woods: "I am willing to believe them to be, on the whole, fair specimens of colonial character. Let them even be rated, if their friends will have it so, in the most respectable class of slaveholders" (57).

(14)See, for example, Jennifer Morgan and Peter Fryer.

(15)Students could think about how Alyssa Milano often gets credited with starting the #MeToo movement, even though it was started by a black woman, Tarana Burke, in 2006.

©Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies, Edited by Stacey Floyd and Melissa Purdue

Works Cited

Allen, Jessica. "Pringle's Pruning of Prince: *The History of Mary Prince* and the Question of Repetition." *Callaloo*, vol. 35, no. 2, Spring 2012, pp. 509-519.

Andrews, William. *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*. U of Illinois P, 1986.

Armstrong, Nancy. *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*. Oxford UP, 1987.

Banner, Rachel. "Surface and Stasis: Re-Reading Slave Narratives via 'The History of Mary Prince.'" *Callaloo*, vol. 36, no. 2, Spring 2013, pp. 298-311.

Baumgartner, Barbara. "The Body as Evidence: Resistance, Collaboration, and Appropriation in *The History of Mary Prince*." *Callaloo*, vol. 24, no. 1, Winter 2001, pp. 253-275.

Block, Sharon. *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America*. U of North Carolina P, 2006.

Bush, Barbara. *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838*. Indiana UP, 1990.

"Court Case Involving Mary Prince *Wood v. Pringle*." *The History of Mary Prince*, edited by Moira Ferguson. U of Michigan P, 1997, pp. 140-149.

Ferguson, Moira. "Introduction to the Revised Edition of *The History of Mary Prince*." *The History of Mary Prince*, edited by Moira Ferguson. U of Michigan P, 1997.

Fryer, Peter. *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*. Pluto, 2018.

Fuentes, Marisa. *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*. U of Pennsylvania P, 2016.

Harris, Dawn. *Punishing the Black Body: Marking Social and Racial Structures in Barbados and Jamaica*. U of Georgia P, 2017.

Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.

----. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America.* Oxford UP, 1997.

----. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe*, vol. 12, no. 2, June 2008, pp. 1-14.

Haywood, Eliza. *Love in Excess*, edited by David Oakleaf, Broadview, 2000.

Jackson, Zakiyyah. "Losing Manhood: Animality and Plasticity in the (Neo)Slave Narrative." *Qui Parle*, vol. 25, nos. 1-2, Fall/Winter 2016, pp. 95-136.

©Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies, Edited by Stacey Floyd and Melissa Purdue

Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Penguin, 2000.

Johnson, Walter. *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom*. Harvard UP, 2017.

Jones-Rogers, Stephanie. "Rethinking Sexual Violence and the Marketplace of Slavery: White Women, the Slave Market, and Enslaved People's Sexualized Bodies in the Nineteenth-Century South." *Sexuality and Slavery: Reclaiming Intimate Histories in the Americas*, edited by Daina Ramey Berry and Leslie Harris, U of Georgia P, 2018, pp. 109-123.

"lick, v." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2020, www.oed.com/view/Entry/108002. Accessed 5 March 2020.

Miller, Chanel. *Know My Name*. Penguin, 2019.

Morgan, Jennifer. *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*. U of Pennsylvania P, 2004.

Morrissey, Marietta. *Slave Women in the New World: Gender Stratification in the Caribbean*. UP of Kansas, 1989

Prince, Mary. *The History of Mary Prince*, edited by Sarah Salih, Penguin, 2004.

Pringle, Thomas. "Supplement to the History of Mary Prince by the Editor." *The History of Mary Prince*, edited by Sara Salih, Penguin, 2004, pp. 39-63.

"The Progress of Colonial reform." *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter*, no. 11, April 30, 1826, pp. 129-170.

Rauwerda, A.M. "Naming, Agency, and 'A Tissue of Falsehoods' in *The History of Mary Prince*." *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 29, no. 2, Sept. 2001, pp. 397-411.

Richardson, Samuel. *Pamela*. Oxford, 2008.

Ridgway, Shannon. "25 Everyday Examples of Rape Culture," *everyday feminism*, March 10, 2014, everydayfeminism.com/2014/03/examples-of-rape-culture/. Accessed 4 July 2020.

Salih, Sara. "*The History of Mary Prince*, the Black Subject, and the Black Canon." *Discourses of Slavery and Abolition: Britain and Its Colonies, 1760-1838*, edited by Brycchan Carey, Markman Ellis, and Sara Salih, Palgrave, 2004, pp. 123-138.

Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke UP, 2016.

---. *Monstrous Intimacies*. Duke UP, 2009.

©Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies, Edited by Stacey Floyd and Melissa Purdue

Spillers, Hortense. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” *Diacritics*, vol. 17, no. 2, Summer 1987, pp. 64-81.

Watt, Ian. *The Rise of the Novel.* U of California P, 1957.

Weheliye Alexander. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Duke, 2014.

The Whole Duty of a Woman: Or, an Infallible Guide to the Fair Sex. London, 1737.

©Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies, Edited by Stacey Floyd and Melissa Purdue