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The History of Mary Prince: a fight for abolition and black feminism

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Dedication

To all the silenced voices.

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Abstract

Mary Prince (c. 1788 – c. 1833), born in Bermuda, was the first black slave woman who published her story and the first woman to present a petition to the British Parliament. Since the publication of *The History of Mary Prince* in 1831, from the pro-slavery to nowadays intellectuals have doubted on the narrative's veracity as it was narrated and not written by Prince. Nonetheless, the story posed an impulse towards abolition and made black women's fight against patriarchy visible. For all that, the treatment that *The History of Mary Prince* has received both in the academic and social spheres is objectively discriminatory and Mary Prince should be given the recognition she deserves as an abolitionist and feminist.

Keywords: *Mary Prince, slavery, feminism, abolitionism, slave narrative*

Mary Prince (c. 1788 – c. 1833), nacida en Bermuda, fue la primera esclava negra en publicar su historia y la primera mujer en presentar una petición al Parlamento Británico. Desde la publicación de *The History of Mary Prince* en 1831, desde los mismos esclavistas hasta intelectuales de hoy en día han dudado de la veracidad de la narrativa por haber sido narrada y no escrita por Prince. Sin embargo, la historia supuso un impulso hacia la abolición de la esclavitud y visibilizó la lucha de la mujer negra contra el patriarcado. Por todo eso, el trato que *The History of Mary Prince* ha recibido tanto en el ámbito académico como social es objetivamente discriminatorio y se debe dar a Mary Prince el reconocimiento que merece como abolicionista y feminista.

Palabras clave: *Mary Prince, esclavitud, feminismo, abolicionismo, narrativa de esclavos*

Introduction

Two years before the British Parliament passed the Slavery Abolition Act, which “abolished slavery in most British colonies, freeing more than 800,000 enslaved Africans in the Caribbean and South Africa as well as a small number in Canada” (Henry, 2020, para. 1), the first known slave narrative published by a black woman was published in 1831 in London and Edinburgh. At that moment, England was living a social change that boosted women to gather and start fighting for their rights. Later in the 1860s, a group of those women would found the Ladies’ London Emancipation Society with abolitionist goals. In that context of social discomfort, Mary Prince described to the British population the atrocities she suffered in slavery with the aim of sending an “antislavery message to the fierce agitation both for and against slavery that had already stamped the early years of that decade.” (Ferguson, 1997, p. 1) She was born in Brackish Pond, Devonshire Parish, Bermuda around 1788, when the island relied on slaves to sustain the salt trade (despite having officially ended slave trade in 1807) and the threat of a slave revolt was constant since the 1600s. Prince came to life in bondage and remained so until 1828, when she landed in the British capital and, finally, became the first black British slave woman to be legally free. For the first time in history, *The History of Mary Prince* offers a distressing account of a woman’s physical and emotional torment as she fought for her freedom. (Rintoul, 2011, p. 41) She spent a life of physical punishments, rapes, and constant emotional torture in the hands of five abusive owners, being separated from her family and having to witness the tortures and murders of other slaves. When she was around 40 years old, the West Indian slave arrived in England with John Wood, her fifth and last master. As the slave trade had been abolished in the Britain in 1807, Prince became automatically free when she landed in British territory. Therefore, she was able to meet the Secretary of England’s Anti-Slavery Society, Thomas Pringle, who gave her the opportunity of having a paid job and bringing her story to print. Finally, in February 1831, Mary Prince’s story was published with the collaboration of an editing team composed mainly by Susanna Strickland (the compiler) and Thomas Pringle (the editor and financial backer). Given the fact that Prince was unable of writing, she had to narrate the story of her life to Strickland, who eventually put Prince’s words into paper. However, being an as-told-to narrative has not contributed to giving veracity to her account. In a society divided between the abolitionists and the ‘representatives of the antiemancipationist plantocracy’ (Prince & Ferguson, 1997, p. 1), Prince’s story became

both a trigger for the approval of the Slavery Abolition Act and an object of criticism and defamation. From the publication of the book until nowadays, far from overcoming the pro-slavery's attempts of discrediting the narration, multiple have been the scholars who have tried to challenge the trustworthiness of Prince's words. Instead of giving Mary Prince the historical importance she deserves, both as an abolitionist and as a feminist who fought for her (and therefore women's) freedom, the vast majority of academics have devoted themselves to doubting the credibility of the first known black slave woman who dared to free herself and shout her story to the world.

For that, the aim of this paper is to claim Mary Prince's place in history, proving her historical importance as an abolitionist in the process of approval of the Slavery Abolition Act, and as a feminist by highlighting the abusive conditions of female slaves and opening a possibility for black women to gain social and literary freedom, proposing a subsequent analysis of her work, and advocating for Prince's social and academic recognition.

State of the art

Since the publication of *History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave* in 1831, scholars have been discussing multiple aspects of her life and narrative. When it was first published, it caused a great controversy among the British society, especially among the pro-slavery. Thomas Cadell, the editor of *Blackwood's Magazine* in London who was in favour of slavery, declared the narrative fraudulent discrediting the ill-treatment declared by Mary Prince against the Woods. Thus, Pringle brought him to trial for the denigration of the slave. Besides, John Wood sued the editor of the narrative for defamation of character. Although winning the first case against Cadell, Pringle and Prince were not able to have justice in their favour in the trial against Mr. Wood. To avoid having his reputation as a good slave-owner and master destroyed, John Wood brought several witnesses from Antigua who testified against Prince's narration of the events. Despite losing, the case gained so much popularity among the British people that, in that same year, three new editions of the narrative were published to satisfy the readers' demands. Truly, a big effort has been put by the pro-slavery to degrade Mary Prince's veracity, and the debate is still on the grid. Along the years, the physical brutality, the sexual abuses, and the general mistreatment Prince suffered as a slave have been a recurrent field of

study, together with the necessity of proving the authenticity of her words, questioning the credibility of an as-told-to narrative. Wide research has been done to deepen in the atrocities Mary Prince suffered and to try to unravel what is true in her story. However, as the British Library puts it,

Though Mary played an important part in the anti-slavery campaign of the 1830s, she was not looked upon as a campaigner in her own right. Even her supporters, who included many middle-class women, did not consider her an equal and did not invite her to join their societies. Mary was a working class, black, female domestic servant and while her cause was taken up by others, she did not have the right to act on her own behalf. (British Library, n.d., para. 4)

While it is true that the British society was moving towards a change, gender, race, and social class inequality still shaped the British mentality. Even though women were starting to have a voice on their own, their rights were not even comparable to men's. Besides, although the abolitionist cause was present in Britain, society was still divided, and black people were not considered first-class citizens. Moreover, it has to be taken into account that the people who had the time to join activist groups were from high social classes, as working-class people could not afford to stop working. Mary Prince was a black, working-class woman. Considering these implications, it is not surprising to find that there is a gap in Mary Prince's life which not many academics have tried to fill in. It is still a mystery whether one of the most important female voices against slavery could return to Antigua as a free woman or she spent the rest of her life in England. Moreover, and although her importance in history is palpable, only a few scholars have dared to explore the possibility of taking into consideration the figure of Mary Prince from a feminist and abolitionist perspective. Despite being the first black slave woman to publish her autobiography and the first woman to present an anti-slavery petition to the British Parliament, she is somehow not included inside the "group of women who changed the world". It is striking to see how powerful the pro-slavery voices were, that they have managed to denigrate the narrative in such a manner that still nowadays continues to be underrated and almost forgotten. Although being the first black slave woman to publish a narrative, the importance that this publication may have had for the following black female writers such as Harriet Jacobs and even Angela Davis is still not acknowledged.

Luckily, during the last decade, some research has been started in the light of Caribbean literature and, in particular, of slave narratives. Moreover, scholars such as the investigator at the Bermudian Department of Community and Cultural Affairs Dr. Margot Maddison-MacFadyen have focused their attention on Mary Prince. Maddison MacFadyen has devoted a great part of her academic life to the investigation and extol of the West Indian slave. Among other fields related to slavery she has worked on, it is worth highlighting the creation of a webpage dedicated to Mary Prince, a lecture given in Bermuda about Prince's latter days and the formation of The Mary Prince Research Group. Although her aim is not to praise Prince from a feminist viewpoint, she does consider her an important figure in the abolitionist cause. Having this in mind, Maddison MacFadyen's interest in silencing all the voices that doubted about the credibility of the narrative has brought her to carry out an extensive examination of the Bermudian records to follow Mary Prince's steps and check the accuracy of the story. Together with Dr. MacFadyen, the feminist writer and specialist on slavery and gender studies Dr. Moira Ferguson has contributed to shedding light on the life of Mary Prince with the publication of a revised edition of *The History of Mary Prince*. This edition includes an introduction, which provides new information and details about Prince's life both as a slave and as a free woman in Britain, and a series of appendixes including Mary Prince's Petition, the transcripts of the two court cases involving her after the publication of the narrative, some excerpts from the Bermudian Royal Gazette illustrating the public's reaction to the narrative, and the 'Narrative of Louis Asa-Asa', which was originally published with Prince's. Far from being only re-examined by Academia, Mary Prince has also been the source of inspiration for artists around the world. For example, the journalist, writer, and descendant of the transatlantic slave trade Juliet Gilkes Romero worked with the Royal Shakespeare Company to create the play *The Whip*. Focusing on the role of Britain in the slave trade, *The Whip* explores the struggles of approving the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833 through the fictionalization of historical figures such as Mary Prince and Mary Wollstonecraft. On the other side, the poet and doctor of the University of the West Indies Gale P. Jackson dedicated her poem "mary prince. bermuda. turks island. antigua. 1787." to the black slave. Talking in first person, Jackson tells Prince's life focusing on her sufferings as a slave, her resistance, and her fight both for black freedom and women's independence. The final stanza of the poem expresses the sexual abuses black slave-women suffered ("the sun went up or down and spread the legs of a woman who has since lost her mind"), the inconclusiveness of Prince's story ("only

the lord god knows what's in store from here on") and her importance in the abolitionist cause ("when they tell the story they gots to begin with mine") (Jackson, 1992). Just like Juliet Shields puts it in her book *Mary Prince, Slavery, and Print Culture in the Anglophone Atlantic World*, "Prince's narrative marks an origin point for the Black diasporic women's literary tradition to which Jackson herself contributes. The open-endedness of the story of Black women's exploitation leaves it up to the readers to determine "what's in the store from here on," or what they will do with what they have learned from Prince." (Shields, 2021, p. 64)

In the sociocultural spheres, Mary Prince has been slowly gaining recognition during the last decades. To start with, in 2007 and because of the 200th anniversary of the Slavery Trade Act, a plaque was erected in London to commemorate Mary Prince, marking the place where she lived during her stay in Britain. After that, in 2012, she was inducted National Hero in Bermuda for the importance her narrative had in the abolition of slavery not only in Bermuda but in the whole Caribbean. In 2018, on the 230th anniversary of her birth, Google dedicated a Doodle to her accompanied by a summary of Prince's life and narrative. Sadly, though, this Doodle was not published worldwide, but restricted to Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, Perú, Ireland, United Kingdom, Germany, Serbia, and Israel. Besides, Emancipation Day is celebrated in Bermuda on July 29, and Somers Day on July 30. However, Admiral Sir George Somers arrived at the island in 1609 and founded the English colony of Bermuda, which would lead to the appropriation of the territory and the exploitation of black people. For that, in 2020 it was decided to rename the 30 July to Mary Prince Day in commemoration of the Bermudian slave who played a significant role in the abolition of slavery. That same year, the Minister of Community Affairs and Sports of Bermuda Lovitta Foggo also announced the renaming of Devonshire Bay Park to Mary Prince Emancipation Park. In the words of Foggo, "This site has historical significance. Mary Prince was born in Brackish-Pond. Brackish Pond was the colloquial name at that time for the parish of Devonshire and most of the houses where she was enslaved were also in Devonshire." (McWhirter, 2020, para. 10) As recognition is being given to her in Bermuda but not internationally, one wonders whether the poor visibility granted to Mary Prince is due to the fact of being born in a little colony in the Caribbean and not in the United States or Great Britain. What would have happened if she were born in North Carolina like Harriet Jacobs? Would she be universally acknowledged then? If the answer is yes, which it probably is, why does society allow

figures who have done so much for human rights to be forgotten, just because of their place of birth?

The defamation of Mary Prince

Objectively, Prince's experience as a slave can be compared to that of Frederick Douglass or Olaudah Equiano. F. Abiola Irele and Simon Gikandi affirm in *The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature*:

At an ultimate degree of vulnerability, she stood up for herself after running away from her owner, then returning to her father, her heroic actions comparable to Frederick Douglass's in the same general period. [...] Like Gronniosaw, Mary Prince dictated her experiences to an amanuensis, who probably edited out anything too "steamy" for the Christian readership. Her tale is one of suffering endured, but ultimately of the human spirit triumphant. (Ferguson 1997: 48–53) (Irele and Gikandi, 2004, p. 247-248)

However, several aspects of Mary Prince's life have influenced so that nowadays she is not an internationally celebrated figure in the world of abolitionism, feminism, and slave literature. Firstly, her origins must be taken into consideration. Differently from Harriet Jacobs, the world-wide known afro American abolitionist, feminist and author of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Mary Prince was from Bermuda. Certainly, the fact of being a slave outside of the US complicated the possibility of accomplishing the status of Jacobs or Douglass. Following the same line, Irele and Gikandi discuss that "Fewer books on slavery by slaves or ex-slaves were published in the Caribbean region than in Britain and in the Americas/United States." (Irele and Gikandi, 2004, p. 245) For that, it can be assumed that Mary Prince's narrative did not get the same visibility as it would have had if she were from the US and not from a little English colony. Secondly, the fact of being a slave woman writing about her experiences did not favour her story to be spread. If one compares Prince's historical and literary recognition to that of her masculine homologue Olaudah Equiano, the difference is striking. Considering that Equiano was the first known black slave to write his narrative and Prince the first known black slave woman to publish her story, similar acknowledgement should be given to both, should it not? Nonetheless, reality is quite different. While Olaudah Equiano is

celebrated for helping to change the British people's opinion about slavery, Prince is relegated to oblivion. Finally, the most relevant reason why Mary Prince's narrative is not considered key in the abolition of slavery in Britain is that the authenticity of the atrocious acts described has been questioned ever since its publication. In 1831, when *The History* was published, it can be understandable the fact that the pro-slavery chose to side with the Woods in their efforts to protect their image and discredit Prince's words. What is not justifiable is that, even having critics like Maddison-MacFadyen and Ferguson who have devoted their life in the study of her life and have corroborated the facts told in the story, Prince's testimony is still challenged. Just as Rintoul states, "Contemporary critics tend not to focus on the integrity of the narrator but are instead concerned with the degree to which her voice was manipulated by Strickland and Pringle." (Rintoul, 2011, p. 42) So, in other words, Mary Prince, a black woman who was born in slavery, whose human rights were directly ignored and who was completely unable to get an education, is still judged for not being able to write her own story and telling it to a white woman born in Britain who did have the opportunity to learn to write. It is surprising to read Dr. Kerry Rockquemore trying to analyse Mary Prince from a feminist perspective and, instead, censuring *The History* for the possibility of containing Pringle's and Strickland's voices too. For her, rather than the fact of being the first known black female slave narrative ever published, what is transcendental in Mary Prince's narrative is that it was "transcribed through the hands of the White female, and then made 'intelligible' by the White male." (Rockquemore, 1999, p. 53) The author James Olney, following the same line, even proposes slave narratives not to be considered 'autobiographies' or even 'literature' because of their political purpose. In the case of Mary Prince, according to Olney, *The History* should not be considered literature for its abolitionist discourse. (Olney, 1984, p. 46) Nevertheless, *History of Mary Prince* should be part of the Universities syllabi due to its objective historical and narrative importance. The main argument that is given to justify the scepticism is the omission of certain aspects of Prince's life as a slave. When comparing Prince's *History* to Jacobs' *Incidents*, the omission becomes obvious. Harriet Jacobs faces the episodes of rape, sexual assault, and jealousy violence with an astonishing clarity. Mary Prince, in contrast, only gives veiled hints of what it must have been for a black slave woman to live under the roof of five abusive masters. Yet, the place where both narratives were written and the way they were written has a lot to do with that difference.

When black women did write or tell their experiences in the United States, their vivid testimonials frequently focused on sexual exploitation and disruption of family ties. British female slaves and ex-slaves, by contrast, were either written about in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* or had little or no opportunity to chronicle, let alone publish, their experiences. (Prince & Ferguson, 1997, p. 4)

Given the fact that both Thomas Pringle and Susanna Strickland were Methodists, the reason for the gap in Prince's story becomes evident. But, considering Prince's oratory power, is it not possible that it was her who consciously encoded the sexual abuses inside her narrative rather than being Strickland or Pringle who censured those parts as it has been discussed? Again, Ferguson argues on that:

Given Mary Prince's economic dependence and the fact that her narrative was intended as propaganda for the antislavery campaign, she would presumably have constructed what she wanted to say very carefully in accordance with what she knew of the aims of the Anti-Slavery Society. [...] In numerous senses Mary Prince's hands were tied. (Prince & Ferguson, 1997, p. 11)

It is time to stop projecting on Prince the image of the 'poor black woman' who was manipulated by white men and women and start considering her the fighting abolitionist and feminist she was.

Mary Prince: an abolitionist and a feminist

As it has been said previously, there is not much to argue about the authenticity of the events related in *The History*. Dr. Moira Ferguson and Dr. Margot Maddison-MacFadyen (among others) have found multiple pieces of evidence both on the Bermuda archives and on the slave-owners' records about Mary Prince's masters, the houses she lived in and the voyages she did along her life. Paraphrasing Ferguson, the only aspect one could quibble about is the fact of having moulded the story to make it fit inside the antislavery propaganda and the evangelical dictates. (Prince & Ferguson, 1997, p. 25) Moreover, "the proslavery advocates (one of whom baptized her) query only the intensity of the cruelty she alleges, never the account itself." (Prince & Ferguson, 1997, p. 15)

Thus, drawing from the premise that what is told in *The History* is truly a part of Mary Prince's life as a slave, her narrative should be analysed in the same way Harriet Jacobs' has been examined ever since its publication: from an abolitionist and a feminist point of view.

When reading the narratives of Frederick Douglass or Harriet Jacobs, their inner strength, and their tenacity in the fight for the freedom of all slaves become the spotlight in the story. The fact of being free to write without being censored made it easier for them to raise their voices and make their narratives part of the abolitionist cause. It was not that easy for Mary Prince, though. She had to fit her narrative in the rigid standards of an evangelical writer and editor, meet the expectations of abolitionist propaganda and still find a way to make her voice heard. And so, she did it. The constant resistance Mary Prince opposed towards slavery is inherent in *The History*. However, the instances of defiance of authority have not been widely explored by the academics. As Dyanne Martin states,

[...] critics have not fully examined the ways in which Prince's subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle mutinies against her oppressors exemplify a growing inner freedom that Prince gains for herself even while still a slave. By exerting her will and disrupting the master-slave dialectic, Prince establishes personal isles of independence despite the societal fetters that bind her. These minor defiances culminate in a final pièce de résistance that engenders her freedom from slavery and is critical for us to understand fully the import of her story." (Martin, 2017, p. 309)

Her courage and the impossibility of bending her to the masters' will led her to suffer constant retaliation that made her even tougher. In that hostile environment, she managed to become free and survive to tell her story. For that reason, Maddison-MacFadyen considers the narrative an Autobiographical Survivor Account, comparing slavery with the Holocaust. (CITV Bermuda, 2019, 22m) On the other hand, Prince's concern to free all the black enslaved people is present throughout *The History*. It is important to mention that, at the same time Prince was in Turks Island, slaves had been talking about freedom and escaping to Saint-Domingue, Haiti, which was a free republic after the 1791 revolution led by Toussaint Louverture. Thus, Mary Prince's spirit of resistance might have been supported and encouraged by the black islanders during her stay on Turks Island. In fact, her solidarity with other slaves is what eventually makes her publish her

narrative as a way to expose the horrors of slavery and impulse its abolition. Significantly, she finishes her narrative declaring: “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.” (Prince & Ferguson, 1997, p. 75) It is not surprising, then, that academics like Ferguson or Martin consider Prince an activist and spokeswoman for the rights of black people. Her identification with freed blacks by challenging her masters’ power made her recognise herself as a black woman rather than a slave and find the strength to defy the Woods and the other pro-slavery. Her acts represented the will of all the black enslaved community to stop an institution of illegitimate domination. (p. 19) Mary Prince’s resistance to imposed control, her refusal to bend down and the acknowledgement of her value as a human being might have been inspiring for other black people and eye-opening for the white British community. Only two years after the publication of *The History*, the British Parliament abolished slavery in the British colonies of the Caribbean, Canada, and South Africa. Mary Prince’s role in the abolition of slavery in her homeland is more than evident.

She had refused to be a Blank page, a body and nothing more, on which they inscribed their power. They had used her to define themselves, and they ended up being defined negatively by her, in public, both at home and abroad. [...] She became the first black British spokeswoman for general emancipation, ending her *History* with the public plea on its behalf. (Prince & Ferguson, 1997, p. 22 - 23)

As formerly mentioned, Mary Prince had to hide the episodes of sexual abuse under metaphors to avoid being censored by Strickland and Pringle. Yet, those episodes can still be found in the narrative, as Prince might have wanted to keep record of what being a slave woman meant. According to Ferguson,

These strategies for encoding the truth and inviting interpretation beyond the surface message are particularly important regarding the question of sexual experiences. Mary Prince’s *History* was sponsored by the Antislavery Society, who won public support by detailing atrocities and portraying female slaves as pure, Christlike victims and martyrs in one of their major organs of propaganda, the Anti-Slavery Reporter. Women whose cause they sponsored could not be seen to be

involved in any situation (even if the women were forcibly coerced) that smacked of sin and moral corruption. Christian purity, for abolitionists overrode regard for truth. Mary Prince manages to foil this taboo by encoding her abusive sexual experiences in accounts of angry jealous mistresses and a master who forced her to wash him while he was naked. (Prince & Ferguson, 1997, p. 4)

When analysing Jacobs' narrative, the general opinion agrees on considering it "a kind of feminist writing which seeks to represent the conditions under which African American women lived during slavery." (Thallam, 2003, p. 23) Objectively, Harriet Jacobs' aim when writing her story is comparable to Prince's. Nevertheless, Mary Prince's narrative is not openly considered a feminist writing, and neither is she. Despite being the first known black woman to publish her narrative (which shows her fight for black liberation and women's rights) and the first woman to present a Petition to Parliament asking for her own freedom, Mary Prince has not transcended history as a remarkable figure within black feminism. For that, *The History of Mary Prince* should be revised considering her participation in the abolitionist movement and also in the movement for black women's rights. (Prince & Ferguson, 1997, p. 29) Mary Prince's life was marred by violent episodes of sexual abuse by her masters and brutal jealousy by her mistresses. Her condition as a slave made it difficult to defend herself against such attacks but, in *The History*, multiple are the examples of rebellion and resistance. Also, Prince tends to make a comparison between her struggles as a slave and the mistresses' struggles as a wife. Although it is not clearly mentioned, Prince suggests that the institution of marriage and slavery are both similarly repressive and abusive for women. In the article "'My Poor Mistress': Marital Cruelty in *The History of Mary Prince*", Suzanne Rintoul explains it in the following way:

History represents the violent treatment of slaves in a highly graphic manner, clearly. Cruelty toward slaves' mistresses, on the other hand, is implied, I will show, but never similarly explicit. Attending to this disparity allows us to more clearly grasp how Prince's story engages with particular configurations of the relationship between marriage and slavery. That is, although the narrative at points suggests that married women and slaves have similar relationships to their shared "masters," the conspicuously inconsistent level of representation afforded to the

abuse of slaves and the misfortunes of their mistresses reveals the inadequacy of an increasingly common “married woman as slave” analogy that emerged in eighteenth-century feminist writing. The narrative underscores, I argue, not only the dissimilarities between married women and slaves but also that the root of the suffering that incited writers to compare marriage to slavery—the hierarchies of middle-class domestic life—actually fostered the conditions for publicly and legally sanctioned brutality. (Rintoul, 2011, p. 42-43)

Anyhow, instead of uniting forces against patriarchy, the mistresses used to see Mary Prince not as an ally but as a threat to their marriage. Thus, recurrent are the moments of violence due to jealousy in *The History*. Actually, Ferguson contemplates the possibility that Prince’s blindness was caused by the frequent head punching by Mrs. Ingham. (Prince & Ferguson, 1997, p. 6) Also, another physical consequence of the beatings and rapes could be the fact that Mary Prince was sterile. As Ferguson suggests, children are never mentioned in the narrative, which is something uncommon in a female slave narrative, and suffering a physical abuse that led her to sterilization could be the answer to that mysterious gap in her story. (p. 14)

Horrible are the violent acts that the masters and mistresses inflicted on Mary Prince. However, Prince never accepted her condition of slave and, for that, she should be considered a symbol of women’s resistance against patriarchy and of black people’s resistance against slavery. She stood up to all her masters (especially Robert Darrell and the Woods) and that put her in great trouble, making her the object of constant lashings and floggings. Far from silencing her, each beat made her reassert herself in the fight for freedom. For example, one of the key moments in the narrative is the one in which Prince relates how Mr. D— forced her to bath him naked, being the only instance of explicit sexual abuse that can be found in *The History*. Apart from describing the sickening event, she relates the way in which she rejected him, not giving in to his threats and, eventually, putting an end to the harassment by petitioning to be sold to Mr. Wood. Probably, the reason why Prince let her include this passage in her narrative was because she openly resisted the sexual encounter and that turned her into a martyr. Moreover, knowing the religious morals of her publishers, Prince narrated the events in the following way:

“The truth is,” she explains to Susanna Strickland, who was transcribing Mary Prince’s narrative, “I did not wish to be any longer the slave of my indecent master.” Here she directly attacks the “loose” sexuality that evangelicals like Susanna Strickland and Thomas Pringle so ardently deplored and elevates the idea of pure “womanhood” they so vigorously advocated. (Prince & Ferguson, 1997, p. 12)

Another moment of female resistance that can be found in the narrative is getting married without the consent of her masters. The fact of getting married to a free black man symbolized a rebellious act towards Prince’s owners. For that, Mrs. Wood ordered her husband to flog her with a horsewhip. Prince, following her insubordinate instincts, explains “I thought it very hard to be whipped at my time of life for getting a husband - I told her so.” (p. 85) As Ferguson states, “Mary Prince had disempowered them by an autonomous (and irreversible) decision.” (p. 17)

Thus, in her *History*, Mary Prince shows the strength of black women against repression, abuse, and mistreatment. Instead of giving the image of a helpless black woman who suffers the injustices of slavery and patriarchy, Mary Prince represents a change: the revolution of all those women who resisted and fought for their freedom. Moira Ferguson claims:

Mary Prince’s story calls for a reappraisal of what has been written about black and other racially oppressed women. [...] Mary Prince inaugurates a black female counteroffensive against a reductive conception of black women as flogged, half-naked victims of slavery’s entourage. Her text encourages a view of emancipationist writers based on gender and racial difference. (Prince & Ferguson, 1997, p. 29)

Revisiting Mary Prince

When doing research about Mary Prince, one realises how absent she is in the academic spheres. Other slave narrative writers such as Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass or Harriet Jacobs are constantly revisited in museums, articles, and books, but Prince is seldom among them. It is surprising to see that the International Slavery Museum of Liverpool and the Museum of London Docklands do not mention Mary Prince in their

webpage, as they do with Equiano. When searching in the webpage of the project “Runaway Slaves in Britain: bondage, freedom and race in the eighteenth century” from the University of Glasgow, one gets the same result. Although being born and spending her childhood in the eighteenth century, Mary Prince is not even mentioned. Besides, it is remarkable to mention that books such as *A Companion to African American History* edited by Alton Hornsby Jr., which is part of the Blackwell Companions and contains multiple original essays about the topic, do not acknowledge Prince for what she and her narrative implied in the history of abolition. Another of these books is the one written by Dr. Mar Gallego, specialized in feminism, gender studies, post-colonialism and diaspora studies, *A Ambas Orillas del Atlántico. Geografías de Hogar y Diáspora en Autoras Afrodescendientes*. Considering Prince’s story and the specialities of the author, this would be the perfect place to revisit *The History of Mary Prince*. Nonetheless, there is not a single reference to her. Furthermore, Mary Prince is also absent in the Faculty of English in Cambridge University. In the degree, the subject of Postcolonial and Related Literatures seems to be the perfect place to find a reference to Mary Prince’s journey to London and her accomplishments. However, and although having a section devoted to feminism in postcolonialism and another one devoted to Anticolonialism, national liberation, and postcolonial nation formation, Mary Prince is not included in the syllabus. In contrast, in the course on Bermudian Literature in Bermuda College, the Bermudian slave society is studied, including Mary Prince and her narrative. Once again, Prince is undervalued outside her homeland.

Mary Prince’s omission in the intellectual spheres is more than evident. Hence, a re-examination of the universities' syllabus is necessary to avoid the silencing of relevant voices for history. Acknowledgement should be given to those people who fought for human rights, as in the case of Mary Prince. It is a shame that pro-slavery people’s arguments still resonate and influence twenty-first century lines of thought. To prevent that, a change is needed. Post-colonial studies, gender studies, Caribbean studies, and all the studies related to feminism, diaspora, slavery, and slave narratives should definitely include *The History of Mary Prince* in their curriculum. What she accomplished during her life merits to be analysed, studied, and taught across the globe. The fact of being the first known black slave woman to publish her autobiography gives her the literary relevance of Olaudah Equiano and constitutes a great opportunity for black women to start publishing their stories. Being the first woman to present a petition to the British

Parliament to free herself helped, again, to give voice to all the black and white women who wanted to express their disagreement with the slave and patriarchal system. Achieving the milestone of publishing her *History* three times in a year is representative of how much the narrative influenced the British society's view of slavery, being key for the approval of the Slavery Abolition Act only two years after its publication. And, finally, fighting for not only her rights but all women's rights and relating her resistance to imposed power in *The History* helped to change the white people's view of black slave women as helpless, innocent and almost childlike, to the strong, tough, nonconformist women they really were. For all that, it is the time to leave the slander of the slavers behind and start giving Mary Prince the place she deserves in literature and history.

Conclusion

The History of Mary Prince has caused great controversy ever since its publication in 1831. Against all odds, Mary Prince managed to travel to London with her last master, John Wood, and his family and write her narrative with the help of the England's Anti-Slavery Society. In the story, she relates the horrors she suffered in bondage but, most importantly, she serves as an example of dissidence and strength for all the black people who were kept slaves. Obviously, the publication of such a narrative posed a threat to the reputation of the Woods and the slavery system throughout the Caribbean. For that, Mary Prince and her publisher Thomas Pringle had to face two court cases: one brought by Pringle against Cadell, the publisher of *Blackwood's Magazine* in London and another brought by John Wood against Pringle. The reason why those cases were brought to justice was the libel of *The History of Mary Prince*. Especially the trial Pringle v. Wood caused a lot of stir among the British society, who became interested in the case and bought Mary Prince's narrative, getting it published three times in a year. So, from that moment, the first known black female narrative ever written gained such a popularity among the British people that created an impact in their vision of slavery. It is not a coincidence that, only two years after the publication of *The History*, the British Parliament passed the Slavery Abolition Act, which abolished slavery in most of the British colonies including Bermuda, Prince's birthplace. However, the pro-slavery advocates' voice was strong; so much so, that their attempts to discredit Mary Prince and her narrative have caused her credibility to be doubted even nowadays. Multiple are the academics who have focused their research on 'the search for truth' in Mary Prince's

narrative or on the sufferings of the ‘poor black woman’. Even though in the last decades a change is taking place in the social spheres, starting to consider Mary Prince for what she represented for the black society, the academic spheres have lagged far behind. It is not easy to find intellectuals such as Dr. Moira Ferguson or Dr. Margot Maddison-MacFadyen who have followed Prince’s steps through her life, have verified the events narrated in *The History* and have worked to give her a place inside the abolitionist and feminist cause. Definitely, Mary Prince’s narrative is full of absences that make one question whether she told the whole truth or not. Nevertheless, before judging her, the conditions in which she was narrating her story must be taken into consideration. The fact of publishing *The History* with the help of Susanna Strickland and Thomas Pringle tied Prince’s hands when it came to narrating events of a sexual nature. Being both of them Methodists, the narration of any sexual encounter in which Prince could not be seen as a martyr was censured. That is the reason why only one of the multiple sexual abuses she suffered is explicitly related in the story. Still, with her great oratory capacity, Prince was able to hide those sexual assaults from the religious eyes of her publishers. Moreover, the resistance she demonstrates against her masters and, in general, against her imposed condition as a slave was key to show the white world the humanity of the black people. She reaffirmed herself and the other slaves as human beings and fought for the freedom of all the black slaves. Also, by rejecting her masters’ sexual intentions with her, she took the authority from them and manifested her nonconformity with the patriarchal and slavery system. Without the intention of being a worldwide recognised figure, Mary Prince stayed out of public life, wanting only to make her message transcend so that her torment helped to stop black people’s suffering.

All in all, the reasons why Mary Prince should be included in the universities’ syllabus are endless. Considering that she is the first known black woman to publish her narrative, it is not nonsense to affirm that she caused a great impact in literature, paving the way for all the black female writers who succeeded her. Also, being the first female slave narrative to be published gave the British society the possibility of learning about the atrocities of slavery from a feminine point of view, which eventually led to the abolition of slavery in the colonies. Finally, a reading of *The History* from a feminist perspective needs to be done. Acknowledging Mary Prince as a feminist, just as it has been done with Harriet Jacobs, is a matter of urgency. It is imperative to stop silencing her for being from the Caribbean and not the US and start recognizing her labour

empowering black women. Thus, this paper aims to make a change in the syllabus of post-colonial studies, feminist studies, gender studies, diaspora studies, Caribbean studies and all the studies related to slavery and slave literature; to make academics revisit *The History of Mary Prince*, acknowledge her importance in the social and literary spheres and include her in the university courses worldwide to let students know who Mary Prince was.

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