

Staging Atlantic Slavery: figuring theatricality, performance and resistance in Anglo-Caribbean narratives of slavery and abolition

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Date Submitted: September 2020

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The author requests that any parties wishing to use, perform or produce the stage plays in this thesis contact margislam@gmail.com.

Abstract

During the period of British abolitionism, there was a marked absence of historically accurate representations of enslaved people on the metropolitan stage. Calls for abolition by the formerly enslaved in the Georgian era nonetheless employed a theatrical idiom, utilising spectacle to enlist support and inspire sympathetic witness in their audiences. Writers such as Mary Prince and Robert Wedderburn dramatized their lived experience in narrative form, deploying performative speech acts and theatricality to press for political change.

This thesis addresses the staging of Atlantic slavery and its legacies through both creative and critical means. It comprises a trilogy of original stage plays, accompanied by critical research interrogating performative, rhetorical and historical constructions and subversions of the discourses of Atlantic slavery and abolition. The first two plays and their concomitant critical work explore how Prince and Wedderburn confronted dominant racialised discourses, forcing acknowledgement of their subjectivity: Prince through linguistic dexterity, encoding and mimicry; Wedderburn through anarchic, carnivalesque theatrics. Working within the prevailing discourses of Christianity and sensibility, both elected to ‘perform the self’, making their own persons central to their work against dehumanizing narratives of enslavement.

Many creative productions and discursive legacies of slavery and abolition in Britain continue to elide the subjectivity of the enslaved. Through the examination of abolition-era historical discourses and contemporary representations, the third stage play explores the ways in which post-colonial narratives of abolition, slavery and reparations continue to impact on British life today. The accompanying critical work offers a reflexive analysis of the discursive, theoretical and imaginative intersections between the creative and critical components of this thesis.

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Acknowledgements

Embarking on a PhD invariably attracts numerous warnings about the hardships of working alone. While this proves to be true, a doctorate is also a collaboration. My heartfelt thanks go to all the family, friends and colleagues who have accompanied me on this five-year journey, especially to Steve Waters, for his inspirational creative guidance, and Alison Donnell, for her exceptional critical rigour.

Thanks and love also go to Manzu, whose quiet but incisive commentary, and constant care and support have sustained me every step of the way.

With grateful acknowledgements to the higher education consortium CHASE, for their generous funding of this research.



Introduction

In the closing paragraphs of *Beloved*, Toni Morrison's 1987 portrait of a woman haunted by the past, the narrator insists repeatedly that the story that has just unfolded is 'not a story to pass on.'¹ This paradoxical injunction captures the complexity of telling stories about slavery. How can artists and creators make cultural products based on three hundred years of inhumanity and annihilation, the chief subjects of which remain largely voiceless and nameless? How to chart the continuing impact of slavery on individuals and societies in countries which, as Morrison herself said, are still suffering from 'national amnesia' on the subject?² The answer lies within those same concluding lines, which capture the paradox of both the narrative enterprise and *Beloved* herself, the ghost of a child murdered by her mother to save her from enslavement and deprive her master of the value of her person. As scholar Jill Matus puts it: 'The narrative project, [...] even as it insists on inscribing *Beloved* as unaccounted for and disremembered – one whose story is inadvisable or impossible to transmit – it also transmits that story, enrolling the unbeloved as beloved.'³ The ghost speaks for those who did not survive. The narrative admits that although a true history is irrecoverable, re-visiting the past in creative representation is necessary for genuine healing.

The central question underlying the work of this thesis is whether it is possible to dramatize Atlantic slavery and abolition. How can enslaved subjectivity be constructed and staged without reducing the enslaved to a homogenised or victimised whole? Do the ontologies of slavery and abolition remain dynamically present in British public life and if so, how can the playwright represent and reify their legacies for a twenty-first century audience? The voices of the enslaved reach down to us in the form of slave, or freedom narratives⁴, most of which were shaped and constrained by their abolitionist sponsors, and were therefore, as Morrison emphasises, 'unable to bear the fullest possible witness to the interior lives of the slave narrators.'⁵ Marcus Wood, an academic and writer on the iconography and representation of slavery, agrees that enslaved writers' texts have generally been subject to the 'normalising structures of bourgeois narrative history.'⁶ Wood's monograph *Slavery, Empathy and Pornography* seeks to explain why British

¹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Picador, 1988), pp. 274-275. In an interview twenty-seven years after the novel's publication, Morrison acknowledged that the narrative could have begun with these last two pages, which contain its central concerns. Toni Morrison, talking to Peter Florence at the Hay Festival, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vtJFK_HtlQk&t=2789s.

² Jill Matus, *Toni Morrison* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 6.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁴ Scholar of African history Nadine Hunt coined the term 'freedom narrative' in 2012, as an updated, alternative descriptor for the genre. Nadine Hunt, 'Remembering Africans in Diaspora: Robert Wedderburn's "Freedom Narrative"', in *Slavery in Africa and the Caribbean: A History of Enslavement and Identity since the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Olatunji Ojo and Nadine Hunt (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), p. 177.

⁵ Morrison quoted in Matus, p. 104.

⁶ Marcus Wood, *Slavery, Empathy and Pornography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 9.

society has constructed Atlantic slavery in the way it has, engaging with the challenges of creating art about slavery. He posits a condition of Post-modern paralysis among writers, which manifests as ‘a form of defeatism which honestly admits the trauma cannot be granted living history.’⁷ Wood concludes, however, that slavery was, and still is, a dilemma for everyone in the United Kingdom; one which is not restricted to raced black subjects alone.⁸ He attests to the ‘long term damage that the systematic repression of the memory of slavery has had on white institutions and creativity in Britain and the Americas.’⁹ This inheritance has animated what Wood refers to as a ‘misremembering’ of slavery, engendering misunderstandings and distortions in collective manifestations and cultural products relating to enslavement.¹⁰

The contested nature of representations of Atlantic slavery, the slave trade and its abolition is reiterated by Douglas Hamilton et al in their 2016 study of slavery, memory and national identity. They contend that ‘national representations of slavery have often sought to minimise collective responsibility for enslavement, while emphasizing contributions to abolitionism.’¹¹ This focus on abolition has meant that ‘efforts to describe and delineate slavery [...] have been consistently animated by prevailing conceptions of national ‘honour’, understandings of ‘civilisation’ and a sense of imagined citizenship and community.’¹² Hamilton et al maintain that ‘understandings of slave pasts have always been intertwined with evolving forms of identity, belonging and community’, emphasising that discourses of slavery and abolition and their legacies re-emerged as a political and sociological focal point from the mid 1990s, nationally and internationally.¹³ This came amid a post-colonial re-examination of issues of race, culture and national identity, and was particularly evident in commemorative and educational settings such as museums, memorials and national curricula. In the twenty-first century, Hamilton et al continue, these national perspectives ‘continue to influence public representations of slavery across the globe, often through new forms of multiculturalism and manifestations of a shared historical ancestry and sense of collective identity.’¹⁴ Despite some reformulations, however, the focus has remained predominantly on abolition and emancipation, a phenomenon reinforced by the events of the 2007 bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in Britain, which saw an explosion in slavery and abolition-related productions. These ranged from a series of projects at

⁷ Ibid., p. 10.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ *Slavery, Memory and Identity: National Representations and Global Legacies*, ed. by Douglas Hamilton, Kate Hodgson and Joel Quirk (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 1.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., p. 2. Hamilton et al conclude that slavery became a locus for political and popular discussion in the mid '90s due to a combination of factors: among them truth and reconciliation processes, empowering marginalised groups in multicultural societies, and calls for apologies.

¹⁴ Ibid.

local, regional and national museums and galleries to commemorative stamps and coins and a national service of commemoration at Westminster Abbey.

Why then was that service of commemoration publicly interrupted by social rights activist Toyin Agbetu, who managed to directly address both the Queen and Prime Minister before being removed by security guards? Agbetu wrote later that he was ‘moved to make a collective voice heard at the commemorative ritual of appeasement and self-approval marking the bicentenary.’¹⁵ He claimed to speak on behalf of the Pan-African community in declaring that ‘the “Wilberfest” abolition commemoration has eradicated any mention of resistance, rebellion and revolution instigated by millions of African people.’¹⁶ This perception of an overarching national concentration on the redemptive potentiality of abolition and its chief white male proponent at the expense of minority groups has been analysed by several historians and academics since 2007.¹⁷ Emma Waterton and Ross Wilson used data from formal institutions (parliamentary debates and political speeches) alongside media reporting and everyday communications (internet-based social platforms) to assess how ‘abolition discourse’ could be seen to be ‘playing a defensive and preventative role that skilfully worked to close down critical and dissenting voices from questioning Britain's responsibilities to contemporary communities.’¹⁸ They argue that around the time of the bicentenary:

As individuals and institutions sought to grapple with the complicity of British Parliament, British business and British people in the enslavement and exploitation of individuals from the African continent, a means of defining and naming the trauma emerged. This focused on the positive memory of the Abolition Act of 1807, drawing continuity between the actions of the abolitionists and Britain's agenda for future and intended moral action in the present, while at the same time glossing over the past.¹⁹

Waterton and Wilson also concluded that the presence of this discourse was not simply as a result of government-implemented directives, but rather ‘symptomatic of the manner in which issues of multiculturalism and diversity are talked about in Britain.’²⁰ Admissions of guilt and apology are often too potent and confronting, they continue, because ‘they threaten to disrupt the collective

¹⁵ Agbetu writing in the Guardian, 03.04.07. <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2007/apr/03/features.11.g2>.

¹⁶ Agbetu is referring to the public veneration of William Wilberforce, the independent MP for Yorkshire who introduced bills to ban the slave trade repeatedly into parliament between 1789 and 1807.

¹⁷ Including: Catherine Hall, ‘Doing reparatory history: bringing ‘race’ and slavery home’, *Race and Class*, Vol. 60, no. 1 (July 2018), 3-21; James Walvin, ‘The Slave Trade, Abolition and Public Memory’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Sixth Series, Vol. 19 (2009), 139-149; and Diana Paton, ‘Interpreting the Bicentenary in Britain’, *Slavery and Abolition*, Vol. 30, No. 2, (June 2009), 277–289.

¹⁸ Emma Waterton and Ross Wilson, ‘Talking the talk: policy, popular and media responses to the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade using the “Abolition Discourse”’, *Discourse & Society*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (May, 2009), 381-399 (p. 396).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 382.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 396.

self-understanding of Britain and the Empire. As such, the silenced narrative of minority groups found little place within the British cultural semantics for remembering Abolition.²¹

Creative representations of Atlantic slavery have to a large extent reflected this lack of plurality. On the small screen, prior to the bicentenary, most white Britons' encounters with narratives of enslavement were limited to the popular 1970s television series *Roots*, with Hollywood films such as Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* and older classics such as *Gone with the Wind* dominating depictions on the big screen.²² These productions locate the enslaved in distant geographical environments; British audiences may consequently have come to associate slavery more readily with American plantations than Anglo-Caribbean settings. Michael Apted's 2006 film *Amazing Grace* is set in Britain, but proves to be a sentimental hagiography of William Wilberforce, where slavery features as little more than a backdrop to the humanitarian concerns of the Yorkshire politician and campaigner.²³ In theatre, few major productions have focused on the legacies of slavery on British soil: with the notable exception of Kwame Kwei Armah's 2003-2007 triptych, from which the play *Elmina's Kitchen* transferred to the West End.²⁴ Since beginning this doctorate in 2016, however, several productions have emerged dealing specifically with slavery on British soil, such as Janice Okoh's play *The Gift* and foundational playwright Winsome Pinnock's *Rockets and Blue Lights*.²⁵ Equally, a new generation of mainstream films about slavery was ushered in by Quentin Tarantino's 2012 *Django Unchained*, which borrowed the tropes of the Spaghetti Western to animate a kind of revenge caper; and Steve MacQueen's *Twelve Years a Slave*, an aesthetically beautiful, harrowing adaptation of Solomon Northrup's 1853 slave narrative.²⁶ Amma Asante's 2017 *Belle*, which brings together the personal fortunes of Lord Chief Justice Mansfield's bi-racial great-niece and two of the eighteenth-century legal cases he presided over, locates the issue of slavery firmly in metropolitan Britain. This costume drama combines Austenian elements with the discussion of human rights versus property law, whilst exploring little-known historical aspects of race, gender and identity.²⁷

Scholars Elisa Bordin and Anna Scacchi have conducted a comparative study of transatlantic memories of slavery in the context of films such as these. They discuss whether dominant narratives of slavery in literature and popular culture are moving away from a focus on trauma,

²¹ *Ibid.*, 381.

²² *Roots*, dir. by Marvin J. Chomsky (Warner Bros., 1977); *Amistad*, dir. by Steven Spielberg (Dreamworks, 1997); *Gone with the Wind*, dir. by Victor Fleming (Loew's Inc., 1939).

²³ *Amazing Grace*, dir. by Michael Apted (Bristol Bay/Samuel Goldwyn Films, 2006).

²⁴ Kwame Kwei Armah, *Elmina's Kitchen* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2003).

²⁵ *The Gift* explores Queen Victoria's relationship with a young West African enslaved girl who was 'given' to the monarch. *Rockets and Blue Lights* takes J. M. W. Turner's painting of the slave-ship *Zong* as its inspiration.

²⁶ *Django Unchained*, dir. by Quentin Tarantino (Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2013); *Twelve Years a Slave*, dir. by Steve MacQueen (River Road Entertainment, 2013).

²⁷ *Belle*, dir. by Amma Asante (Fox Searchlight, 2014). The Somerset case, presided over by Lord Mansfield, is described in 1.2. The case of the slave-ship *Zong* hinged upon the deliberate drowning of human 'cargo', brought by the insurers against the ship's owners.

mourning and loss to embrace a narrative of change and ethical memory. They acknowledge nonetheless that public memorialisations remain ‘deeply conflictual, sensitive sites of national identity’, because the memory of slavery and its legacy ‘still shapes the social construction of blackness and whiteness’ in Western society.²⁸ Bordin and Scacchi argue that popular culture harbours a ‘long history of complicity with racism and perpetuation of racial hierarchies of oppression.’²⁹ To date, many creative productions have been merely ‘period pieces that present slavery as a concluded history’, or perpetrate a ‘formulaic acknowledgement of western collective guilt which [...] [is] concurrently lessened by the celebration of white fighters against slavery.’³⁰ These two academics cautiously welcome the recovery of slavery ‘through memory and narrative articulated in different forms other than ceremonious and scared, ritual and hedged with interdictions.’ Such works do not have to be realist; they can be ironic, grotesque, ludic and carnivalesque, constructing new narratives – not just those of the victim or the white saviour.³¹

Bordin and Scacchi emphasise that the kind of memories of slavery national constituencies choose to endorse will be fundamental in the fight against racism; and the embodiment of those memories ‘in literature, the arts, public spaces and popular culture will be key in the effort to bridge the racially separate archives of the past.’³² In the second decade of the twenty-first century, in the aftermath of the so-called Windrush scandal, the decolonisation of arts and educational establishments is gaining momentum.³³ Previously unheeded voices are making themselves heard. Following the police killing of unarmed Black man George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement has spearheaded popular protest all over the world against systemic racism.³⁴ In the U.K., citizen action culminated in acts of targeted civil disobedience such as the tearing down of the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol in June 2020.³⁵ These events have precipitated a re-appraisal by councils all over the U.K. of their public memorialisation policies. More explicit connections are thus being made in public life between the narratives of slavery and its legacies and contemporary race relations in Britain. British theatre is also beginning to showcase more dramatizations of Britain’s relationship with her colonies and

²⁸ *Transatlantic Memories of Slavery: Re-imagining the Past, Changing the Future*, ed. by Elisa Bordin and Anna Scacchi (New York: Cambria Press, 2015), p. 7.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³³ The 2017-18 Windrush scandal resulted from the so-called climate of hostility in the British Home Office. All U.K. residents were required to produce detailed employment records and/or identity documents, culminating in numbers of Caribbean people being deported, many of whom had arrived as children over half a century before. The extent of the scandal was revealed by the Guardian newspaper.

³⁴ Black Lives Matter was founded in 2013 in the U.S. by three radical Black female organisers. It is now a global organisation dedicated to eradicating white supremacy and building local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities.

³⁵ Edward Colston (1636-1721) was a merchant, slave-trader, philanthropist and Tory MP. A prominent local benefactor in Bristol, as a member of the committee of the Royal African Company, his ships are believed to have transported upwards of 80,000 enslaved people to the Americas.

the impacts of slave-holding on British soil. The 2019-2020 theatrical season proved particularly rich in plays featuring stories linked to former enslaved Anglo-Caribbeans and British slave-owners. These included Juliet Gilkes Romero's play *The Whip*, which tells the story of the compensation package offered to British and colonial slave-holders at the time of emancipation in 1834.³⁶

Such is the creative context and overall discursive background which informs and animates the three stage plays and academic research presented in this thesis. The involvement of my own ancestors in slave-holding and colonial governance also constituted much of the impetus for this research project. Sir William Young, first British governor of Dominica in 1763, oversaw the distribution of land in the ceded islands and owned nine plantations, along with 896 African slaves. His son, also Sir William Young, was a vocal anti-abolitionist MP and one-time Governor of Tobago.³⁷ This aristocratic ancestry aside, the compensation package, which enriched many individual investors as well as commercial and institutional ones, confirms the conviction that everyone living in post-colonial Britain is affected by and implicated in the histories and legacies of Atlantic slavery, however we self-identify and wherever we locate our subjectivity. The collective preoccupation with memorialising abolition, and Britain's part in it, also underlies the imaginative and intellectual endeavour of this study. Events unfolding in summer 2020 may prove to mitigate otherwise, but to date many historians, such as David Olusoga, journalists such as Afua Hirsch and Reni Eddo-Lodge, and artists such as social entrepreneur Akala, have noted the disproportionate emphasis on abolition in educational curricula, the media, creative products and public memorialisations.³⁸ The subjectivity of the enslaved themselves has thereby been elided. The principal subjects of this thesis are two West Indians: Robert Wedderburn and Mary Prince, both of whom used their voices to openly challenge prevailing discourses of slavery and abolition in Britain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The first two plays and concomitant critical chapters seek to explore how these subaltern subjects dramatized and performed the narratives of slavery and abolition in the metropolitan context, to express resistance and mobilise support for their claims to freedom, on their own and others' behalf. The third play in the trilogy portrays historical, personal and material links with contemporary socio-cultural, discursive and

³⁶ Juliet Gilkes Romero, *The Whip* (London: Oberon Books, 2020). Other plays include May Sumbwanyambe's play *Enough of Him*, featuring enslaved Scot Joseph Knight's legal struggle for freedom in the late-eighteenth century. An article introducing these plays can be found here: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-51177299>.

³⁷ In 1791 Young conducted a tour of the West Indian estates he inherited from his father, along with considerable debts. The resulting account appeared in the pro-slavery history of the West Indies published by politician and historian Bryan Edwards. *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British West Indies*, Five Vols (London: J. Stockdale, 1793).

³⁸ David Olusoga, *Black and British: A Forgotten History* (London: Pan, 2016); Afua Hirsch, *Brit(ish): On Race, Identity and Belonging* (London: Vintage, 2018); Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I am no longer talking to White People about Race* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); Akala, *Natives: Race and Class in the Ruins of Empire* (Two Roads, 2018).

rhetorical legacies of enslavement and abolition, consciously engaging with ongoing questions around these legacies, such as that of reparations.³⁹ Its accompanying critical chapter undertakes an examination of the methodological and ontological questions raised by the attempt to creatively represent this wide-ranging research material, interrogating the challenges of staging enslaved subjectivity and analysing the mutual points of interrogation between the imaginative and critical corpuses. This introduction will continue with a brief exposition of the historical, literary and theatrical context in which the subjects of this thesis are located, as well as the critical discourses with which it hopes to engage.

0.1 Whose Abolition is it Anyway?

In the years since Eric Williams's ground-breaking decline thesis in 1944, which put forward the argument that the slave trade in Britain and the Caribbean was ended for economic reasons, there have been multiple explorations of the social, economic and cultural factors that led to its abolition.⁴⁰ Mainstream academic explanations that cite the early roots of the Parliamentary campaign as 'the conflation of the two religious movements of the Quakers and the evangelicals [...] combined with the general enlightenment belief in progress and benevolence'⁴¹ now include and acknowledge the major part that ordinary Britons played in applying pressure to political elites.⁴² Williams's argument, though still influential, has to a large extent been superseded, whilst previously unacknowledged factors, such as the part played by Black abolitionists, have gained increasing attention.⁴³ Some narratives have been highlighted at the expense of others, as Caribbean historian Diana Paton emphasises.⁴⁴ Paton claims that the discursive prominence of certain aspects of abolition can vary according to the exigencies of contemporary politics; for instance, the due emphasis now given to the contribution made by slave revolts in the Caribbean

³⁹ This refers to ongoing demands for financial and other forms of reparations for the cultural, social and economic damage done by slavery, to be paid by Britain to Caribbean countries; claims which are overseen by the CARICOM Reparations Commission.

⁴⁰ An academic and historian, Williams was Trinidad and Tobago's first Prime Minister, from 1962-81. His 1944 work *Capitalism and Slavery* introduced the economic 'decline thesis', provoking ongoing scholarly debate over the rationale for the ending of the slave trade in Britain and the Caribbean. Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1964).

⁴¹ *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation: Writings in the Romantic Period*, Vol. 2, ed. by Peter Kitson (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1999), p. xv.

⁴² See Clare Midgley, *Women Against Slavery: the British Campaigns 1780-1870* (London: Routledge, 1992) and Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's slaves* (New York: Houghton and Mifflin, 2005). Also Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilization in Comparative Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Roger Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolitionism, 1760-1810* (London: Macmillan, 1975).

⁴³ Important refutations of Williams include: Seymour Drescher, *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010) and David Eltis, *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁴⁴ Paton, 'Interpreting the Bicentenary', 277-289.

may be partly due to the ‘reformulation of the politics of race in Britain since the 1970s.’⁴⁵ Indeed, the proliferation of previously overlooked or more outward-looking explanations for the origins and implementation of British abolitionism has been such that John Oldfield, current Director of the Wilberforce Institute for the study of Slavery and Emancipation at Hull University, appears anxious that the part played by Wilberforce and the ‘saints’ risks becoming forever unfashionable.⁴⁶ This seems unlikely, however, and several major analyses, such as Robin Blackburn’s *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery* and David Brion Davis’s *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, helpfully synthesise many of the disparate political and economic arguments, whilst not discounting the role of philanthropy. Brion Davis linked the rise of antislavery to the rise of capitalism, not for the benefit of industrial capitalists, but within the broader intellectual and moral world that capitalism created.⁴⁷ Blackburn contended that abolition was instrumental for the political and economic elite, both in terms of finding common cause with popular middle-class radicalism, and unifying a nation at war with France. ‘In a deeply conservative political system,’ Blackburn writes, ‘abolition of the slave trade became not so much the most urgent, as the least controversial, reform that could be undertaken.’⁴⁸ He emphasises that opposition to the slave trade was so successfully linked with British patriotism and national pride that: ‘a species of abolitionism became part of the reigning consensus’.⁴⁹

This rejection of an over-simplified moral or economic explanation for British abolitionism is echoed by scholar Christopher L. Brown, in his 2006 study *Moral Capital*, which undertakes a comprehensive re-examination of the roots of antislavery thought. Brown argues that men and women often ‘fought slavery because they disliked what slavery wrought, because it affected colonial or metropolitan society in undesirable ways, or because it threatened cherished values.’⁵⁰ Appeals to the core values – essentially the moral conscience and character of the British people, and its deep incompatibility with the institution of slavery, were central to anti-slavery argumentation.⁵¹ Abolitionists initially focused on the inhumanity and immorality of the slave trade, and after its abolition, on the corrupting spirit of slavery itself. Not only was much emphasis placed on slavery’s incompatibility with Christianity, but there was also a marked focus on the polluting effect of the brutal subjection of others on the slave-holder him or herself. A range of

⁴⁵ Ibid., 280.

⁴⁶ J. R. Oldfield, *Chords of Freedom: Commemoration, Ritual and British Transatlantic Slavery* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007). The Clapham Sect or ‘Saints’ were a group of Church of England social reformers which included Wilberforce.

⁴⁷ David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966).

⁴⁸ Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery: 1776-1848* (London: Verso, 1988), p. 152.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 314.

⁵⁰ Christopher L. Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), p. 26.

⁵¹ In a typical example from an 1807 House of Lords debate, Lord Mahon wonders how it is possible that ‘we will suffer this stain to tarnish the lustre of our national character.’ Hansard, Slave Trade Abolition Bill, 23rd February 1807, Volume 8, col. 969.

actors, from Parliamentarians and campaigners to writers such as the former enslaved Olaudah Equiano, all concurred that the Atlantic trade polluted everyone who came into contact with it.⁵² Thomas Pringle, Anti-Slavery Society secretary and poet, wrote: ‘Slavery is an institution which, wherever it exists, must produce misery and degradation to all concerned in it; to the master as well as the slave.’⁵³ As such, Christopher Brown asserts that many British people were motivated less by their care for Africans than because they regretted slavery’s ‘impact on society, on the empire, on public morals, or on the collective sense of self.’⁵⁴ Being free of slavery could mean being free from danger, corruption, or guilt.⁵⁵ It could also help resolve the deepening sense of moral dissonance that was developing between Britain and her colonies: how could a nation whose origin narratives were steeped in the precepts of freedom, justify the enslavement of other human beings?⁵⁶

This seemingly paradoxical axiom, which geography, amongst other factors, had worked to distance and disguise for at least a century, was dismissed by some pro-slavery advocates on the basis that Africans were inferior, and their exploitation was justified. The most notorious of these apologists was the absentee planter and juror Edward Long, whose 1774 *History of Jamaica* was highly influential.⁵⁷ Long sanctioned the enslavement of Africans by claiming that they were a different species to white Europeans.⁵⁸ This view may have been one factor which enabled British legislature, and possibly society at large, to side-step the manifestly fundamental contradiction embedded in the trade in human beings by so-called enlightened societies. Many academics concur: Peter Kitson, editor of *The Abolition Debate*, summarises the argument thus:

Africans suffered from an established prejudice against their skin colour, which made it easier to regard them as inferior to Europeans and therefore suitable for slave labour, believed to be essential to the prosperity of the colonies and the mother country. [...] This led to a view of Black African slaves as constituting chattel or property. [...] Once this

⁵² Lord Calthorpe declared, at a general meeting of the Anti-Slavery Society: ‘It was not merely the agony and degradation which the negro himself suffered; but it was the corrupting and brutalizing effect produced on the master also.’ See *The Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter*, Vol. 1, No. 1, June 30th 1825.

Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, was a prominent writer and abolitionist. His biographer Vincent Carretta summarises Equiano’s feelings as the European traders encroached on his homeland: ‘the corruption of the transatlantic slave trade, he discovered, contaminated everyone.’ In Vincent Carretta, *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-made Man* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), p. 326.

⁵³ Thomas Pringle’s article on the South African slave trade in the *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter* on 31st January 1827. In Appendix 4 of Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave*, ed. by Sara Salih (Penguin: London, 2004), p. 104.

⁵⁴ Brown, p. 26.

⁵⁵ Brown calls this the ‘self-concerned, self-regarding or even self-validating impulse in early British abolitionism.’ Ibid.

⁵⁶ This anomaly is borne out by the uncertainty surrounding the status of enslaved people on British soil, which is examined in 1.2.

⁵⁷ ‘A book highly respected in his day and long after his death.’ Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), p. 134.

⁵⁸ ‘I think there are extremely potent reasons for believing that the white and the negroe are two distinct species.’ Edward Long, *History of Jamaica*, Vol 2 (London: T. Lowndes, 1774), p. 336.

slippage between persons and things had occurred it was easier to acquiesce in the enormous ideological blind spot that allowed the otherwise ‘freedom-loving’ British [...] uneasily to rule the African slaves out of their political considerations.’⁵⁹

The designation of the African slave as property underpinned slavery’s legal status; however, the notion that the marker of race was the primary driver of slavery is an over-simplification.⁶⁰ Accordingly, a close study of the Parliamentary debates relating to the abolition of the slave trade reveals that overtly racist views were aired relatively rarely. With some notable exceptions,⁶¹ most pro-slavery lobbyists, whether sincerely or not, expressed regret both within and outside Parliament for the negative exigencies of the Atlantic trade in slaves, whilst maintaining that such exploitation was an economic necessity for this country.⁶² Thus, the good of the nation was invoked by both sides of the debate. Anti-slavery advocates called upon the enlightened spirit of Britons to act as leaders and show an example to the wider world. In a typical illustration of this the Lord Chancellor declared to the House of Lords in 1806 that ending the slave trade was: ‘our duty to God, and to our Country which was the morning star which enlightened Europe, and whose boast and glory was to grant liberty and life, and administer humanity and justice to all nations.’⁶³ In their turn, pro-slavery advocates questioned how the abolitionists could so endanger the health and wealth of the nation. One member of Parliament declared that:

⁵⁹ Kitson, Vol. 2, p. x.

⁶⁰ Roxann Wheeler argues, in *The Complexion of Desire*, that: ‘Race was an imprecise term, particularly in the first half of the eighteenth century: savagery, civility, and Christianity were the major concepts that embodied racialized understanding.’ Roxann Wheeler, ‘The Complexion of Desire: Racial Ideology and Mid-Eighteenth Century British Novels’, *Eighteenth Century Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Spring 1999), 309-332 (p. 310). Eric Williams states that the construction of race was not the principal *raison d’être* of Atlantic slavery. ‘A racial twist has [...] been given to what is basically an economic phenomenon. Slavery was not born of racism: rather, racism was the consequence of slavery.’ *Capitalism and Slavery*, p. 7. Brown concludes however that though coherent theories of biological difference did not emerge until the early nineteenth century, prevailing assumptions among Europeans about the physical and cultural differences they perceived in Africans nevertheless meant most learned to associate slavery with black skin. The arguments are also usefully explored by George Boulukos in his book *The Grateful Slave: The Emergence of Race in Eighteenth-Century British and American Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁶¹ Sir William Pulteney declared that since the West Indies cannot be cultivated by Europeans, it must be done by ‘some other class of the human species.’ Since they (the Negroes) were not naturally disposed to labour, it was necessary to ‘use something of compulsion’, which was ‘the common condition of the lower orders of society.’ Hansard, Slave Trade, House of Commons Debate, 28th February 1805, Vol 3, 659.

⁶² See Bryan Edwards, *A Speech delivered at a Free Conference between the Honourable Council and Assembly of Jamaica on the Subject of Mr Wilberforce’s Propositions in the House of Commons concerning the Slave Trade (1790)*, in Kitson, Vol. 2, pp. 282-325. The attitude of many can be discerned in this summing up by one MP, who acknowledged that ‘it is not an amiable trade, and neither is the trade of a butcher an amiable trade, and yet a mutton chop is, nevertheless a good thing.’ Mr Grosvenor, April 11th 1791, in William Cobbett, *The Parliamentary History of England*, Vol 29 (London: Hansard, 1816), Col. 281. Most anti-abolitionists, after their initial attempts in 1789-91 to defend the benevolence of the British slave trade failed to convince, argued instead that it was not timely, politic or convenient to abolish the trade at any given moment.

⁶³ Hansard, 24th June 1806, Vol. 7, 807. One MP enthused after Wilberforce’s motion to abolish the slave trade in 1789 that the speech had made him ‘more proud to be an Englishman than he had ever been before.’ Mr Martin quoted in Cobbett, *Parliamentary History*, Vol. 28, 76.

In respect to encouraging the Slave Trade, he would certainly advise it; and why? because our commerce had derived such immense sources of wealth and prosperity from it, as had proved a great means of raising the country to its present state of aggrandisement and magnificence, and enabled us to contend with our enemies.⁶⁴

The enrichment argument, as history records, lost out to the humanitarian one, at a time when moral considerations were increasingly finding their way into discourse. According to David Brion Davis, the ‘emergence of an international anti-slavery opinion represented a momentous turning point in the evolution of man’s moral perception, and thus in man’s image of himself.’⁶⁵ Moreover, the era of British abolitionism, coinciding as it did with the loss of the colony of North America and the rise of capitalism, has also been represented as a period of active nation-building. Scholar Debbie Lee argues that the debate over emancipation signified a profound step for the British people as a nation: it ‘initiated a review of not just the issues raised by the argument itself but their perceptions of themselves.’⁶⁶ The historian Linda Colley concurs with this view. In her study of the formation of the nation, *Britons*, Colley contends that:

Successful abolitionism became one of the vital underpinnings of British supremacy in the Victorian era, offering – as it seemed to do – irrefutable proof that British power was founded on religion, on freedom and on moral calibre, not just on a superior stock of armaments and capital.⁶⁷

Colley argues that for most of the century, prior to the loss of America in 1783, many Britons ‘had seen no inconsistency whatever between trumpeting their freedom at home and buying men, women and children from trading-posts in Africa to sell into slavery.’⁶⁸ She maintains that the growing revulsion against the practice, from the 1760s onwards, was compounded by the national humiliation of losing the American colony; a failure which ‘precipitated not so much a sea-change in British attitudes to the slave trade, as a converting of already existing qualms into positive action.’⁶⁹

Brown agrees that the American revolution was a pivotal event in the history of British slavery and abolition. He writes that ‘the conflict [...] directed unprecedented attention to the moral character of colonial institutions and imperial practices’⁷⁰, and that antislavery sentiment grew as a result. Hence, asserts Brown, the crisis in imperial authority caused by the revolution

⁶⁴ Gascoyne, MP for Liverpool. Hansard, 10th June 1806, Vol. 7, 592.

⁶⁵ David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 42.

⁶⁶ *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation, Vol 3: The Emancipation Debate*, ed. by Debbie Lee (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1999), p. xvii.

⁶⁷ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (London: Pimlico, 2003), p. 359.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 351-352.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 352

⁷⁰ Brown, p. 27.

in America ‘turned the slave system into a symbol, not just an institution, the source of self-examination as well as a fount of wealth.’⁷¹ This self-examination, according to Colley, often took a moralistic turn. The defeat in America was as a result of profligacy, corruption and presumptuousness.⁷² ‘Was it really to be expected that a nation that sold the heathen for selfish gain instead of endeavouring to make them Christians would be allowed to flourish?’⁷³ This paradigm is borne out by Wilberforce’s announcement to the House, on first introducing his slave trade bill in 1789: ‘I mean not to accuse anyone, but to take the shame upon myself, in common, indeed, with the whole parliament of Great Britain. [...] We are all guilty – we ought all to plead guilty.’⁷⁴ Colley contends that there was a growing perception in the country that its progress on both moral and secular matters would depend on how it comported itself on the issue of slavery.⁷⁵ Thus the abolition of the slave trade represented not only the potential for atonement, but a ‘unique commitment to liberty at a time when war with America [...] had called it widely in to question.’⁷⁶ Colley concludes that seen from this point of view, the success of the anti-slavery movement had an overwhelmingly conservative impact, despite being generally considered the first grassroots organisation. This was partly because abolitionism benefitted the elites by drawing attention away from issues nearer to home, such as social reform. It also ‘supplied the British with a powerful legitimisation for their claims to be the arbiters of the civilised and uncivilised world.’⁷⁷

The outpouring of emotion that followed the outlawing of the trade was directed as much towards the British people as the liberated Africans. This was epitomised by Thomas Clarkson, whose 1808 history was the first official account of abolition. He eulogised: ‘For while we rejoice to think that the sufferings of our fellow-creatures have been thus, in any instance, relieved, we must rejoice equally to think that our own moral condition must have been necessarily improved by the change.’⁷⁸ Clarkson, according to Brown, established the teleological view of abolitionism as the ‘hand of divine providence, or the verification of a nobility ostensibly essential to the English character.’⁷⁹ His account provided the framework for antislavery history for a century,

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Colley, p. 353.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Cobbett, *Parliamentary History*, Vol. 28, 42.

⁷⁵ Colley quotes the Bishop of Durham telling the Lords in 1807: ‘We were a people more favoured by heaven than any other nation had been from the commencement of time [...] but we should beware how we forfeited the protection of providence by continual injustice; for if we did we should look in vain hereafter for the glories of the Nile and Trafalgar.’ Colley, p. 353.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 354.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 359. In this way, anti-slavery activity contributed to the rhetoric and historiography of subsequent British empire building, enabling historians to infer that abolitionism’s moral capital uniquely qualified Britain to colonise others. Derek Peterson, scholar of imperialism in Britain and Africa, argues that ‘if Britons were collectively guilty, they stood also to share in the collective reward that abolition would bring to the nation.’ *Abolitionism and Imperialism in Britain, Africa, and the Atlantic*, ed. by Derek R. Peterson (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), p. 12.

⁷⁸ Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament*, Vol. 1 (London: R. Taylor and Co., 1808), p. 1-2.

⁷⁹ Brown, p. 3.

ensuring that ‘British primacy in the war against barbarism reaffirmed the nation’s place at the apex of refinement and virtue.’⁸⁰ In the ensuing hundred years, the Victorians oversaw the prodigious expansion of a vast overseas empire. The 1907 centenary of the abolition of the slave trade passed with little fanfare, which is unsurprising to scholar Boyd Hilton, who argues, in Derek Peterson’s collection *Abolitionism and Imperialism*, that: ‘Edwardians saw little point in celebrating the virtue of abolition given that the British empire was steeped in virtue from first to last. Abolition was a single straw in a haystack of good deeds.’⁸¹

With the passage of another century, however, had come the almost entire dismantling of Britain’s overseas possessions. Hilton contends that one aspect of this disintegration of empire was ‘a historiographic revaluation of the great campaign against the slave trade and slavery’ in British public discourse.⁸² Public interest in Atlantic slavery and abolition swelled during the marking of the bicentenary of the ending of the slave trade in 2007. The year marked a cultural explosion in abolition-related productions.⁸³ Slavery historian Seymour Drescher remarks that the anniversary:

Seems to have regenerated interest in all aspects of the history of transatlantic slavery and abolition. Indeed, one would have to hark back seven or eight generations to the great popular petitions of the half century before 1840 to find a similar level of British popular involvement.⁸⁴

Writing about the bicentenary a decade later, historian Catherine Hall notes that Prime Minister Tony Blair’s government chose to focus on abolition, not slavery, in an echo of the narrative that had been established from the early nineteenth century. She argues that this government focus ‘was part of an updated version of the Whig story of progress, of Britain’s capacity to lead the world on issues of liberty and freedom.’⁸⁵ Hall insists that the legacies of abolitionist discourse in the United Kingdom have contributed to the constitution of both black and white identities, and due to its assumed white superiority, it is a ‘discourse that has had powerful echoes into the present.’⁸⁶ That elements of abolitionist discourse continue to impact on British society would

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 5.

⁸¹ Peterson, p. 68.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Many of the projects and their outcomes are compiled on this website: www.antislavery.ac.uk.

⁸⁴ Seymour Drescher’s review of J. R. Oldfield’s ‘*Chords of Freedom*’ in *Slavery and Abolition*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (December 2008), 533–542 (pp. 540-541).

⁸⁵ Hall, ‘Doing reparatory history’, 5. She continues: ‘the attachment to the idea of abolition as a mark of Britain’s love of liberty and freedom [...] is [...] linked to a deep, yet disavowed, attachment in English culture to Britain’s imperial power.’ Ibid., 12.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 5. Hall argues that in the context of policy and practice, anti-slavery activism ‘was vital, but it did not always undermine notions of white superiority.’ Ibid., 18.

appear to be borne out by David Cameron, British Prime Minister from 2010–2016, who continued to refer to the abolition of slavery as one of the high points of British achievement.⁸⁷

Much of the public interest generated by the 2007 bicentenary was premised upon abolition and the granting of freedom to the enslaved, and as such it consistently coalesced around one man, William Wilberforce, who has come to symbolise anti-slavery for many white Britons.⁸⁸ His dogged introduction of abolition bills into Parliament, combined with his engaging personality and a first major biography written by his own sons, helped establish his luminous standing in the Victorian public imagination.⁸⁹ Apart from a lull during the mid-twentieth century, this heroic reputation has endured, despite more recent post-colonial re-readings of the narratives of slavery and abolition within the academy. In 2008, it was still possible for the politician William Hague, the veteran evangelical's most recent biographer, to conclude that: 'in the dark historical landscape of violence, treachery and hate, the life of William Wilberforce stands out as a beacon of light, which the passing of two centuries has scarcely dimmed.'⁹⁰ As Seymour Drescher drily notes, 'the heritage of Wilberforce [...] has not foundered.'⁹¹ This is despite the fact that a minimum of textual scrutiny reveals Wilberforce's evangelistic crusades, paternalistic modalities and moralising tone as highly anachronistic. His conviction, for instance, that Africans were 'not yet fit for the enjoyment of British freedom'; but rather should be elevated 'at least from the level of the brute creation into that of rational nature'⁹², makes a firm distinction between full citizenship and British dominion. He stresses the suitability of the freed slave to become part of a 'powerful, though laborious and obedient peasantry' on several occasions.⁹³ That a public figure such as William Wilberforce, a noted campaigner against slavery, candidly espoused such categorising paradigms – views that in the twenty-first century would be classified as explicitly racist – provides an apposite contemporaneous illustration of the circumscriptions and limitations

⁸⁷ David Cameron's 2014 article on 'British Values' in the Daily Mail included a reminder that 'this is the country that helped fight fascism, topple communism and abolish slavery.' David Cameron, 'British Values,' Daily Mail, 15 June 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/british-values-article-by-david-cameron>.

⁸⁸ Nowhere is this more evident than in a newspaper review of a 2007 art exhibition on slavery at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, which fumes: 'Not one of the self-centred scribblers in what passes for a catalogue has the courtesy to mention Wilberforce or abolition.' The article writer goes on to claim that the memory of abolition has been 'hijacked by the descendants' of the victims of slavery and 'turned into a scourge with which to whip guilt into society.' <https://www.standard.co.uk/arts/where-is-wilberforce-in-all-this>.

⁸⁹ Journalist and author Adam Hochschild describes Wilberforce thus: 'His charm, personal kindness, reputation for integrity and deep conservatism on most issues gave him influence with his fellow MPs that few others in Parliament had.' http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/abolition/william_wilberforce_article_01.

⁹⁰ William Hague, *William Wilberforce, The Life of the Great Anti-Slave Trade Campaigner* (London: Harper Perennial, 2008), p. 515.

⁹¹ Drescher, review of J. R. Oldfield's *Chords of Freedom*, 540.

⁹² William Wilberforce, *An Appeal to the Religion, Justice, and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire, In Behalf of the Negro Slaves in the West Indies* (London: J. Hatchard and Son, 1823), p. 73.

⁹³ Hansard, 28th February 1805, Vol. 3, 672. He also refers to 'a free and happy peasantry' in *An Appeal*, p. 6.

facing the Black subject wishing to contribute to or challenge prevailing enlightenment discourses of abolition.

Writers such as Mary Prince and Robert Wedderburn therefore remained thoroughly outside contemporary definitions and depictions of ‘humanity’ and ‘civilisation.’ Prince was a self-manumitted enslaved woman from the West Indies; Wedderburn a mixed-race freeman from Jamaica. He arrived in Britain in the late eighteenth century, she in the early nineteenth, and their attempts to gain a hearing must be contextualised in the light of the numerous social, political, cultural and economic constraints that demarcated and delineated their subjectivity in both colony and metropole. Any literary ambitions or endeavours by people of African descent in Britain were strictly delimited and mediated, mainly through abolitionist outlets. However, the other principal imaginative and creative format that prevailed in the Georgian era was drama. At first glance, it appears as though the theatre – a popular and ubiquitous form of entertainment for all levels of society during this period – was a place where black representation flourished. Some of the most successful productions of the age featured Black, African and enslaved characters. Could it be that the subjectivity of Black and colonised people was being legitimately expressed and convincingly reflected on the stage? Is it possible that the English theatre represented a credible site of meaningful discussions of colonisation and enslavement in the era of abolition?

0.2 A Theatre of Abolition?

‘I have not come here to be insulted by a set of wretches, every brick in whose infernal town is cemented with an African's blood!’¹

Although this explicit expression of anti-slavery sentiment was shouted from the stage of the Liverpool Theatre Royal in January 1805, it is not a line from a play. The popular tragedian George Frederick Cooke, arriving drunk and incoherent to the stage, was booed and hissed by his Liverpool audience. He rounded on them and shot back the above insult. It is an anecdote that highlights the apparent absence of direct and unequivocal criticism of the institution of slavery within English theatrical productions during the era of British abolitionism.² In the late eighteenth century, theatre fed into public discourse on a scale that is hard to imagine today. With a high turnover of productions and a range of entertainments on offer, the playhouse was a social hub: an effective site for the exchange and dissemination of news and views. As eighteenth-century

¹ George Frederick Cooke quoted in Williams, p. 63.

² A period generally defined as mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century. Anti-slavery activity existed in various forms before William Wilberforce's first Parliamentary bill in 1789, and continued on the international stage after the 1834 emancipation Act that ended slavery in the British Caribbean, Mauritius and the Cape. Robin Blackburn cites the years 1776 to 1848 as definitive in witnessing successive challenges to the regimes of colonial slavery which led to its overthrow. Blackburn, p. 3.

drama scholar Gillian Russell puts it: ‘The metropolitan theatres formed a kind of Grand Central Station of eighteenth-century cultural and social networks, a place of meeting for individuals but also of ranks, circles and genders’.³ For the many who could not read, the playhouse was more accessible than the newspapers, and affordable to all but the very poorest. The dramatic subject matter, although limited by the censor, reflected in various ways the issues of the day, and the scope of engagement with the theme of enslavement was ambitious.⁴ Scholar of Romantic literature Jeffrey Cox notes that Africans, slavery and ‘blackness’ featured in ‘almost every theatrical season through the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.’⁵ One of the best-known depictions appeared in numerous dramatic adaptations of Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*, the tale of an African prince sold into slavery; the play originated with Thomas Southerne's version in 1695 and went on to enjoy 315 performances in what remained of that century, as well as a revival in the following.⁶ *Inkle and Yarico*, the multiply-adapted story of inter-racial love and betrayal, was also widely staged.⁷ Theatre-goers would have been familiar with stock Black characters such as Mungo, the harassed and comical enslaved servant in the opera *The Padlock*, and stereotypes such as the ‘evil Moor’ epitomised by Iago in Shakespeare's *Othello*.⁸

Despite the breadth and depth of this material, however, scholars are reluctant to identify the existence of a constituted, coherent ‘theatre of abolition’, obtaining independently of the

³ Gillian Russell quoted by David Francis Taylor in the introduction to Julia Swindells and David F. Taylor, *The Oxford Handbook to the Georgian Theatre, 1737-1832* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 3. See also *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre, 1730-1830*, ed. by Jane Moody and Daniel O'Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁴ Due to the licensing act, from 1737 to 1824 all plays had to pass through the Lord Chamberlain; anything considered political was excised. Hence the theatre of the period was long subject to a ‘decline of drama’ historiographic narrative, but recent scholarship has led to ‘widespread recognition of the [...] extent to which ‘high’ and ‘low’ theatrical cultures were enmeshed at discursive and embodied levels, and of the texts and records of performance as a rich and often disturbing archive of hegemonic attitudes about class, race, and gender.’ Swindells and Taylor, p. 1. For the creative ways in which censorship was circumvented see Jane Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁵ Jeffrey Cox in the introduction to Peter Kitson and Debbie Lee, Series eds., *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation, Writings in the Romantic period, Vol 5: Drama*, ed. by Jeffrey N. Cox (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1999), p. viii. I use the term blackness advisedly since the great majority of drama was written and performed by white people until the advent of American actor and playwright Ira Aldridge in 1825.

⁶ Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko, Royal Slave*, ed. by Joanna Lipking (New York: W.W Norton and Co Ltd, 1997).

⁷ The story began as an anecdote written up by Richard Steele in the *Spectator* (No. 11, March 13th 1711). Made into a comic opera by George Colman the Younger in 1787, it has since undergone multiple adaptations. See Swindells and Taylor, p. 688. See also Beryl Gilroy, *Inkle and Yarico* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1996).

⁸ Isaac Bickerstaff (librettist) and Charles Dibdin's comic opera *The Padlock* opened at Drury Lane theatre in 1768. See Dorothy Couchman, “‘Mungo Everywhere’: How Anglophones Heard Chattel Slavery”, in *Slavery & Abolition*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (April 2014), 1-17. For characterisations of the ‘Moor’ see Anthony Gerard Barthelemy, *Black Face, Maligned Race: The Representation of Blacks in English drama from Shakespeare to Southerne* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1987); and Emily J. Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor: From Alcazar to Othello* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

designated body of anti-slavery literature.⁹ Cox maintains that many of the enslaved characters in the drama of the period were merely ‘conventional figures from sentimental tragedy done in blackface.’¹⁰ Theatre scholar Bridget Orr agrees, contending that in Georgian theatre, a slavery theme was often no more than a vehicle for a romance, or a she-tragedy.¹¹ Audience identification with Oroonoko, she argues, ‘derived in part from their sympathy for a king humiliated and betrayed [...] rather than the way in which his fate revealed the horrors of the slave trade per se.’¹² Even John Fawcett’s highly popular 1800 pantomime *Obi or Three-Finger’d Jack*, which featured a slave revolt in Jamaica, and as such was one of the few Anglo-Atlantic plays to act out a Black underclass character’s rebellion against society, ultimately reinforced entrenched prejudices with its restoration of order to the island, aided and abetted by the loyal, enslaved populace.¹³

A focus on individual agency could also result in overly noble characters such as Oroonoko and Yarico, with their pure and exemplary motives, serving to confirm prejudice and feed negativity towards the bulk of the ‘ordinary’ enslaved populace.¹⁴ Conversely, anti-slavery themes and story-lines in drama were frequently employed to stage universal predicaments, or encode broad-brush and generic characterisations of the yearning for liberty.¹⁵ Opposition to slavery in the name of sentimental humanitarianism evaded the issue of collective responsibility and avoided any perception of enslavement as a British national project. As Cox maintains: ‘In this turn now to the abstractly universal, now to the particular individual, what is lost is the sense of guilt of nations or of specified communities.’¹⁶ The actor Cooke’s drunken declaration quoted above is so singular because it explicitly fingers a socio-economic community in a manner that the drama of the period simply does not, or cannot.¹⁷ Some historians, among them Prathibha

⁹ Although slavery scholar J. R. Oldfield maintains that from around 1760 drama began to question the morality of slavery. He cites John Hawkesworth’s 1759 revised version of *Oroonoko*, which recast West Indian planters as morally corrupt and the enslaved as their victims. Oldfield, J. R. ‘The “Ties of Soft Humanity”: Slavery and Race in British Drama, 1760-1800’, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (1993), 1-14.

¹⁰ Cox, p. xiv. This is borne out by a remark by the playwright Matthew Monk Lewis, who said of the portrayal of African slaves in his popular gothic play *The Castle Spectre* (1797): ‘Could I have produced the same effect by making my heroine blue, blue I would have made her.’ Quoted in Hazel Waters, *Racism on the Victorian Stage: Representations of Slavery and the Black Character* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 25.

¹¹ The theme of slavery was also exploited to sentimentalise trans-racial relationships, or stage questions of gender. For post-colonial analysis of Inkle and Yarico and other narratives of the period featuring trans-racial romances between colonials and indigenous people, see Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 90-97.

¹² Bridget Orr, ‘Empire, Sentiment and Theatre’, in Swindells and Taylor, pp. 622-642 (p. 624).

¹³ Fawcett’s *Obi* is available online at <http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/obi>. The text is based on *Obi; or, Three-finger’d Jack!; a serio pantomime in two acts* (London: Duncombe and Moon, c.1825).

¹⁴ That these plays escaped the censor’s blue pencil may be another indication they were not directly critical of slavery, although Cox suggests this is proof of a growing societal consensus on the iniquities of the slave system. Cox, p. viii.

¹⁵ For an exploration of slavery on the stage in this period, see Waters, *Racism on the Victorian Stage*.

¹⁶ Cox, p. xiii.

¹⁷ As Hazel Waters explains, this disjunction between art and reality enabled theatre, at the height of West Indian slavery, to represent England as the defender of liberty and of the enslaved. Thomas Bellamy’s

Kanakamedala, therefore argue that staging Atlantic slavery amounted to little more than the re-commodification of its profits into entertainment. ‘The profitability of the slave trade and the slave body,’ she writes, ‘was re-commodified to ensure the commercial vibrancy of the theatrical market.’¹⁸ Kanakamedala’s work seeks to establish a connection between the appearance of plays featuring enslavement on the English stage with concurrent incidences of slave unrest and rebellion in the West Indies. She argues that:

The dramatic lexicon of the Georgian playhouse presented selective, inaccurate, and distorted re-imaginings of rebellion and conflict, thereby alleviating white anxieties around the increasingly complex relationship between the metropole and the colonies. In historical accounts, enslaved people were tortured and killed for their participation in the uprisings. In theatrical discourses this account underwent a radical reinterpretation: the middle passage was omitted entirely and atrocities occurred offstage [...]. The sombre realities of slavery – rape, kidnapping, flogging, mental torment – simply do not exist in this theatre archive.¹⁹

This misrepresentation of the multiple manifestations of enslavement could in large part be attributed to the almost total omission from the discourse of the voices of the enslaved themselves. If the realisation of slave-holder fantasies or the re-imaginings of plantation life were wildly inaccurate, who would challenge them? The enslaved were debarred from entry into either the public sphere or the socio-economic community, and remained detached from the historical record; apart from a small number of slave and freedom narratives, few written records exist that originated from enslaved, Black and mixed heritage people. Those who were published, among them Prince and Wedderburn, had to rely to a large degree on the sponsorship of white interlocutors. As colonised subjects, both West Indians’ voices (but especially Prince’s) are compromised by what scholar of slavery and abolition Ryan Hanley calls an obnoxious editorial process of ‘transcription, edition, mediation, intercession and interception.’²⁰ Wedderburn’s publications were influenced and / or re-drafted by his ultra-radical colleagues; Prince’s narrative was dictated to an amanuensis and published by the abolitionists, who, according to Hanley, ‘edited and marketed her and her work, deliberately engineering a gendered perception of her as a passive victim of abuse and exploitation.’²¹ All of the work of this thesis, therefore, professes to a strong awareness of the limitations placed on the capacity of the subaltern subject to speak, and acknowledges the compromised authorship of the chosen texts.

1789 *The Benevolent Planters* paints its slave-owning protagonists as paternalist protectors who rescue their bondsmen from a sordid life in benighted Africa and gift Christianity to them. Waters, p. 1.

¹⁸ Prathibha Kanakamedala, ‘Staging Atlantic Slavery’, in Swindells and Taylor, pp. 673-687 (p. 673).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 674.

²⁰ Ryan Hanley, *Beyond Slavery and Abolition: Black British Writing c. 1770-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 77.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 78-9.

Prince's and Wedderburn's lived experience, as related in their written texts, rivals any drama that could be seen in the Georgian playhouse. In the absence, in this period, of historically accurate representation of enslaved people on the metropolitan stage, the first two parts of this thesis will explore the theatrical and performative voices of these two previously enslaved West Indians. Was it possible for formerly enslaved subjects to write against national discourses which appeared to construct slavery, abolition and emancipation whilst evacuating Black and mixed-race voices? This thesis will argue that both Prince and Wedderburn found it necessary to foreground the self in their work, deploying their life experience, and in Mary Prince's case her body, as a form of script, in a conscious act of storytelling and dramatization. In pressing for reform, Wedderburn especially employed a theatrical idiom that was inextricable from contemporary political agitation. As David Taylor emphasises, in his introduction to a recent comprehensive study of Georgian theatre: 'The politics of the period is now often broached precisely in terms of its theatricality, with recognition that the structures of parliamentary debate, of elections [...] of patriotism, and of political protest, were all self-consciously performative'²² This argument is endorsed by the scholar Julia Swindells' contention that political agitation and theatricality in the era of abolition were fundamentally intertwined.

Swindells, a foremost historian of Georgian theatre, challenges the view that the popularity of the plays described above, with their comic, stereotyped or sentimentalising treatment of the narratives of abolition and slavery, lacked political force. Without denying that the issues were 'accommodated and trivialised through laughter', she contends that 'by the same set of devices, comedy could be effective in challenging stereotypes.'²³ Theatre is unique in being able to explore, through 'visual and oral disturbance, that territory of racial difference', she continues.²⁴ Swindells maintains that many plays, including those described above, 'would not have been popular if they had not taken the radical propensity of the audience, informed by its knowledge and involvement in the abolition and emancipation movements seriously.'²⁵ Aside from the middle classes, many of whom were involved to varying degrees in the abolitionist movement, a large proportion of the audience were working people, who Swindells claims constituted that movement's grassroots support base.²⁶ In her monograph *Glorious Causes*, she explicitly connects agitation for political reform with theatricality in Georgian society. She argues that from the French revolution in 1789 to the advent of emancipation in 1833, 'theatricality was indispensable to the attempt by various agents, groups, and movements, whether successful or not, to produce a less hierarchical social order and a more democratic form of representative

²² Swindells and Taylor, pp. 3-4.

²³ Julia Swindells, *Glorious Causes: The Grand Theatre of Political Change, 1789-1833* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.68.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

²⁶ The latter claim remains unproven due to lack of research in this area. For arguments pertaining to class and abolitionism, see 2.3.

government.²⁷ Many individuals involved in radical political activity, Swindells claims, were rendering collective objection to authority visible by making ‘a public spectacle of the subject of private suffering.’²⁸ In many ways, she writes, the fact of censorship, and the resulting bowdlerisation of overtly political content, meant that performative manifestations of discontent by radical groups or individuals ‘constitute the defining relations between the politics and theatricality of late Georgian Britain.’²⁹

This mutually constitutive relationship between theatre and politics in the radical movements of late Georgian Britain – the political character of theatricality, and the theatrical character of politics – forms the conjectural backdrop to the arguments of this thesis. I will build on the link between theatricality and politics to argue that both Mary Prince and Robert Wedderburn deployed their voices performatively to press for immediate reform. Though Prince’s campaigning focus was neither politically expressed nor legislatively organised, she capitalised on the contradictions built into colonial administrations such as those in the West Indies, with comparisons such as:

They can’t do without slaves, they say. What’s the reason they can’t do without slaves as well as in England? [...] They hire servants in England; [...] That’s just what *we* want. We don’t mind hard work, if we had proper treatment and proper wages.³⁰

Prince’s demotic rhetoric advances a lucidly reasoned, politicised demand for change that unequivocally confronts prevailing colonial discourses of enslavement. Robert Wedderburn not only practised as a theatrical, charismatic preacher but was also involved in direct political action. According to his biographer Iain McCalman, Wedderburn’s Rabelaisian mock sermons, during the insurrectionary years of the early nineteenth century, ‘made the idea of black slave revolution a commonplace in London ultra-radical circles; through him the “horrors of slavery” became an ingredient in the crucible of British working-class consciousness.’³¹ The following section of this introduction will provide a brief background to the life and work of both Prince and Wedderburn, locating them in their geographical, social and literary context.

²⁷ Swindells, p. xi.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.* For the relationship between radical politics and the heavily regulated Georgian theatre, see also David Worrall, *Theatrical Revolution: Drama, Censorship and Romantic Period Subcultures 1773-1832* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

³⁰ *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave: Related by Herself*, ed. by Moira Ferguson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1997), p. 94. Italics in original.

³¹ *The Horrors of Slavery and Other Writings by Robert Wedderburn*, ed. by Iain McCalman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), p. 32.

0.3 A public spectacle of private suffering

The Black presence in Britain around the end of the eighteenth century has been variously estimated as between ten and twenty thousand people, mostly concentrated in London.³² Of these, many were employed (or enslaved) in domestic situations. As well as performing their duties of labour and service, the presence of a Black person in a British household was often a status symbol. In *Black England*, historical biographer Gretchen Gerzina describes how aristocratic women showed off their young Black pages, who were dressed in silks, sometimes with a silver padlocked collar. These pages were often cast off when they reached adolescence and lost their boyish looks, or rebelled against their position.³³ The writer and critic David Dabydeen has also drawn our attention to the numerous Black retainers in Hogarth's paintings, depicted sitting at the feet of their masters in poses of supplication, adoration and subjection.³⁴ As the British journalist S. I. Martin points out, this was a role previously filled by a dog.³⁵ However, the majority of the Black population lived among the working poor of London, with a high concentration in the area of St Giles. Many were escaped or manumitted slaves; there were also African-Americans who had fought for the British during the American Revolution; a sizeable number were also lascars. As well as domestics, cobblers, musicians and entertainers, there were many beggars and serenaders.³⁶ Their lives were vulnerable and contingent; their livelihoods tenuous. Despite the Mansfield ruling in the Somerset case of 1772, the legal status of enslaved or self-manumitted people remained uncertain.³⁷ Black subjects were culturally, legally, economically and socially disadvantaged in metropolitan Britain.³⁸ It was against this background that Mary Prince and Robert Wedderburn published their writing.

Prince's text *The History of Mary Prince*, and at least one of Wedderburn's publications: *The Horrors of Slavery*, can be characterised as slave, or freedom narratives, a genre which followed a largely formulaic pattern. The dominance of the autobiographical 'I' is one of its key tropes, as James Olney, the writer on autobiography outlines in his list of conventions associated with the genre.³⁹ From Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoana in Britain, to Harriet Jacobs and Frederick

³² Some historians use Lord Mansfield's estimation in 1772 of between 14 and 15,000, or Granville Sharp's figure of 20,000. See Fryer, p. 68. F. O. Shyllon concludes that the number is unlikely to have exceeded 10,000 at any given time throughout the eighteenth century. Folarin Shyllon, *Black People in Britain 1555-1833* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 102.

³³ Gretchen Gerzina, *Black England: Life Before Emancipation* (London: John Murray, 1995), pp. 15-17.

³⁴ David Dabydeen, *Hogarth's Blacks: Images of Blacks in Eighteenth Century English Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985).

³⁵ S. I. Martin, *Britain's Slave Trade* (London: Macmillan, 1999), p. 128.

³⁶ See Shyllon, *Black People in Britain*, pp. 159-165.

³⁷ This ruling is explained in 1.3.

³⁸ See Shyllon, *Black People in Britain*, pp. 84-125.

³⁹ James Olney. "I Was Born": Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature.', *Callaloo*, No. 20 (1984), 46-73 (p. 51).

Douglass in North America, the first person narrator is a central attribute of these texts.⁴⁰ This however, also proves to be their most vulnerable aspect, due to the perceived inherent unreliability of the witness – the enslaved him or herself. Testimonials were needed to accompany the text, often by white abolitionist friends or ghost-writers.⁴¹ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) by the African-American Harriet Jacobs, features two letters of recommendation as well as an editorial legitimising the narrative. Phyllis Wheatley, also African-American, was questioned by a distinguished panel for many days to ascertain the authorship of her poetry.⁴² Prince's sole publication *The History of Mary Prince*, is therefore a composite text, hemmed in by para-text and editorial, enough to threaten to overwhelm the slim, thirty-eight page narrative.⁴³ Wedderburn's short but varied list of publications carries no such stamp of legitimacy from the establishment, for reasons explored below. However, he lived and worked within a group of fellow radicals, without whose support it is less likely his voice would have been heard.

Many British people read slave narratives in this period and they were undoubtedly powerful weapons for the proponents of anti-slavery. Sue Thomas, in her study of life writing in plantation slavery cultures, points out that even the publication notice for the *History of Mary Prince* urges that it had the potential to help bring slavery to an end.⁴⁴ However, to this day, much scholarship is devoted to the scrutiny of slave narratives, and as Marcus Wood notes, disproportionate attention is given to question marks over their veracity and authenticity, in comparison to the work of their white Western counterparts.⁴⁵ Although the genre of modern autobiography was emerging in the latter half of the eighteenth century as a medium for self-fashioning, it was generally a Western white male preserve that, as Gillian Whitlock emphasises in *Postcolonial Life Narratives*, was embodied in a literary canon that privileged a specific enlightenment archetype of sovereign self-hood. 'Traditional assumptions about autobiographical authorship and authority prioritise authenticity, autonomy, self-realisation and transcendence,' she writes, based on the view that 'each individual possesses a unified, unique self-hood that is also the expression

⁴⁰ *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* was published in 1789; Ottobah Cugoano's narrative in 1825. Both were prominent abolitionists. Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2001). *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, ed. by Houston A. Baker Jr. (London: Penguin, 1986).

⁴¹ Olney, 50.

⁴² Wheatley had to defend the authorship of her poetry before several Boston luminaries. The governor of Massachusetts eventually signed an attestation in the preface of her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, published in London in 1773.

⁴³ This thesis uses three publications of Prince's text: Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave*, ed. by Sara Salih (Penguin: London, 2004); *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave: Related by Herself*, ed. by Moira Ferguson (London: Pandora, 1987); and Ferguson's revised edition (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1997). The 1997 edition is used here unless stated otherwise.

⁴⁴ Sue Thomas, *Telling West Indian Lives: Life Narrative and the Reform of Plantation Slavery Cultures 1804–1834* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p.1.

⁴⁵ Wood, *Slavery, Empathy and Pornography*, p. 11.

of a universal human nature.⁴⁶ However, the hybrid nature of dictated texts such as those by former enslaved people, renders terms such as ‘self’ and ‘author’ highly problematic. The concept of unique self-hood did not include subaltern peoples, who largely fell outside the enlightenment definition of the universal. The colonial subject was always reduced, through ideas of authenticity and origin, to a binary, serving or adjacent subject in relation to the first world – none more so than writers of slave narratives, who were obliged to follow a set pattern of well established tropes, which, although necessary to prove their works’ veracity, also mitigated against originality and imagination. As Olney explains, any creative writing in this context could have been seen as fabrication. ‘The ex-slave narrator’, he argues, ‘is debarred from [...] anything [...] other than the purely, merely episodic, and he is denied access, by the very nature and intent of his project, to the configurational dimension of narrative.’⁴⁷

Thus, Black writers were caught in a vicious cycle: largely forbidden from adopting literary tropes that were indicative of sovereign self-hood, yet challenged to produce authentic productions against a background of suspicion and incredulity. Bound by this contradiction, Mary Prince and Robert Wedderburn had to search out ways to attain legitimacy and produce authority. How could they record their own subjectivity within the boundaries imposed by metropolitan society? While it is essential in the cases of both writers to acknowledge the limitations of a model of subjectivity based on notions of self-autonomy that were unavailable to them, both in their different ways elected to make a public spectacle of their private suffering, to borrow the words of Julia Swindells. Prince’s simple yet lyrical descriptions of her terrifying experiences portray enslaved people’s daily lives with vivid, poignant clarity. Passages such as this extract from her account of the day she and her siblings were sold at auction, in the presence of their mother, conjure and construct a dramatic picture that reifies the quotidian fate of so many enslaved people: ‘My heart throbbed with grief and terror so violently, that I pressed my hands quite tightly across my breast, but I could not keep it still, and it continued to leap as though it would burst out of my body.’⁴⁸ It is also noteworthy that Prince does not neglect to follow this up with a pointed accusation against those who had subjected her to this terror:

But who cared for that? Did one of the many bystanders, who were looking at us so carelessly, think of the pain that wrung the hearts of the negro woman and her young ones? No, no! [...] Oh those white people have small hearts who can only feel for themselves.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Gillian Whitlock, *Postcolonial Life Narratives: Testimonial Transactions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 2-3.

⁴⁷ Olney, 48.

⁴⁸ Ferguson, *The History*, p. 62.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

This blunt indictment of white people opposes head on the colonial discourse which claimed that the enslaved were inherently suited to and / or content with their situation.⁵⁰

Robert Wedderburn also repeatedly attacked the institution of slavery, though his interventions were more confrontational, more politically targeted, and delivered to a live, volatile audience.⁵¹ In this reported extract from one of his sermons, Wedderburn uses slavery as a metaphor for the political situation in Britain:

Before six months were over there would be [...] slaughter in England for their Liberty. Death was as acceptable as Slavery, and if he was to die for his Liberty it would rouse those he left behind him to kill their masters to gain their Liberty.⁵²

Although Wedderburn's aggressive formulations demonstrate very little communality with Prince's carefully curated accusations, these citations show that despite the narrow constraints imposed upon them, both West Indians were arguably able to retain a distinctive, independent quality in their discourse. The nature of their activities, their means of production and publication, and their core audiences were very different, however. Prince's book was sponsored by the abolitionists, while Wedderburn used radical presses to plot revolution and twice found himself behind bars. Prince's audience was drawn mainly from the literate middle classes, whereas Wedderburn's comprised a motley assemblage of political radicals, artisans and the London poor. Prince was enslaved until the age of forty; Wedderburn was a freeman from the age of three. Being female, as were much of her anticipated audience, the boundaries of Prince's subjectivity and claims to authorship, as well as the limitations imposed on her published material, were robustly policed by the abolitionists, in the name of decency and propriety. A slave narrative by a female subject had never previously appeared in metropolitan Britain. Therefore, one of the most significant differences between Prince and Wedderburn, in terms of writerly identity, is that Prince was a woman.

⁵⁰ For a racist iteration of this discourse, see Edward Long, *History of Jamaica*, p. 336. For an example of the discourse that reinforced the moral and social legitimacy of the institution of slavery whilst arguing for its amelioration, see Hilary Beckles's analysis of Lady Nugent's writing. The wife of the Governor of Jamaica from 1801-5 recorded her thoughts on enslaved people's social conditions in detail. Hilary Beckles, *Centering Woman: Gender discourses in Caribbean Slave Society* (Oxford: James Currey Ltd., 1999), pp. 88-105.

⁵¹ Wedderburn's speeches are also only available in mediated form, through government surveillance records, and as such must be approached with caution.

⁵² PRO HO 42/195 in McCalman, *Horrors*, p. 114.

0.4 An Occluded Voice? The History of Mary Prince ⁵³

The History of Mary Prince was the first published work of its kind by a Black woman in Great Britain. Born in Bermuda, Prince arrived in Britain around 1828, and within a short time had liberated herself. Working thereafter as a domestic in the house of the poet and abolitionist Thomas Pringle, she dictated her story to the young lodger, Susanna Strickland, who was later to become the Canadian settler-writer Susanna Moodie.⁵⁴ Pringle edited the script and published it under the auspices of the Anti-Slavery Society. This intervention by both amanuensis and editor resulted in a weighty paratextual apparatus operating on the text, setting up what the scholar of Black Atlantic literature Edlie Wong called, in 2009, 'a dialectic of erasure and exposure', of the kind which often shaped women's representations found in anti-slavery print culture.⁵⁵ The problematics of these representations and interventions in relation to Prince are explored by the critic A. M. Rauwerda, who argued in 2001 that the misrepresentation of subaltern women by the narratives of colonial history has rendered them 'doubly compromised colonial subjects.'⁵⁶ Drawing on the work of feminist critics Chandra Mohanty and Gayatri Spivak, Rauwerda is critical of some scholars' tendency to 'oversimplify representations of third world women in order to facilitate analysis.'⁵⁷ Rauwerda contends that the desire to locate an 'authentic' voice has obscured the compromised status of autobiographical texts in colonial cultures, such as Prince's *History*. Rauwerda characterises Thomas Pringle's 'well-intentioned' abolitionist impulses as highly intrusive, asserting that his 'insistence on making a case for abolition out of Prince's story has occluded her.'⁵⁸

⁵³ The title references Henry Louis Gates Jr's assertion that Prince's text enabled the Black female subject to 'gain a voice'. *The Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Penguin Group, 2002), p. 10.

⁵⁴ Susanna Moodie wrote *Roughing it in the Bush* (1852), amongst other pioneer accounts, and is regarded as one of Canada's founding writers.

⁵⁵ Edlie L. Wong, *Neither Fugitive Nor Free: Atlantic slavery, Freedom Suits, and the Legal Culture of Travel* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), p. 57. All such texts had to be accompanied by affidavits from credible mentors, friends or supporters. As well as the preface, the supplement contains Pringle's own assessment of Prince, character witnesses, letters both for and against her and his ripostes to them. See both Salih and Ferguson for Supplements and Appendices. Prince's pamphlet went through three publications in its first year; the political stakes were high for both the pro- and anti-slavery lobbies. This helps explain the extensive para-text, resulting correspondence, newspaper interest and court cases. The material has only grown with subsequent editions. Ferguson, in both 1987 and 1997, extensively researched the background and added more testimony, archival information and newspaper articles from Britain and the Caribbean. This included providing the names of some of Prince's owners, which are omitted in the text. As such, the process of textual verification and authentication is ongoing.

⁵⁶ A. M. Rauwerda, 'Naming, Agency, and "A Tissue of Falsehoods"' in "The History of Mary Prince", *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2001), 397-411 (p. 397).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 398. Rauwerda draws on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*. Both in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), pp. 28-27; pp. 242-245. Rauwerda argues that holding Mary Prince up as 'an icon of black women's power, agency, and autonomy' has suited the feminist agendas of some of her interlocutors, including her 1987 and '97 biographer, Moira Ferguson. *Ibid.*, 407.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 398.

The scholar K. Merinda Simmons, who discusses Prince's narrative in the context of migration and diaspora, agrees with Rauwerda, contending that texts such as Prince's 'raise issues of power and privilege, marginality and authority, truth and authenticity in ways which may disqualify them as autobiography as it is conventionally understood.'⁵⁹ A focus that relies on the idea of 'authenticity', asserts Simmons, searches unproductively for a 'trope upon which these very narratives cast doubt.'⁶⁰ Thus, as the *History's* late twentieth-century editor Sara Salih summarises, some recent responses to Prince's text 'have tended to elide its context as well as its inter- and intra-textuality by reading the text according to narrow feminist-essentialist, Black-canon-building agendas.'⁶¹ It is crucial therefore, continues Salih, to read the text 'amidst its extended textual supplementation', approaching it 'in its historical articulation, rather than as autonomous, self-contained, or foundational.'⁶²

Nonetheless, some critics maintain that aspects of Prince's authorial voice have not been completely obscured by the twin demands of abolitionist propaganda and moral propriety. Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo, in her 2005 study *Black Cosmopolitanism*, acknowledges Prince's text as an important forerunner in discourses of transnational Black identities and subjectivities, due to her 'cognizance of and connection to the world beyond Bermuda.'⁶³ Nwankwo contends that Prince inserts herself forcibly into the emancipation debate of the 1830s as a 'Black, female, West Indian voice' grounded in 'a racially based notion of community.'⁶⁴ Despite being neither a man nor British, Nwankwo continues, Prince is determined to make her voice heard.⁶⁵ American scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. concurs, arguing that Prince's speaking voice, transformed into a literate text, stands at the crossroads of 'the black vernacular and the literate white text, of the spoken and written word, of oral and printed forms of literary discourse.'⁶⁶

⁵⁹ K. Merinda Simmons, 'Beyond "Authenticity": Migration and the Epistemology of "Voice" in Mary Prince's "History of Mary Prince" and Maryse Conde's "I, Tituba"', *College Literature*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (2009), 75-99 (p. 76-7). The generic question of autobiography is addressed in 1.2.

⁶⁰ Ibid. Simmons's essay argues that the 'idea of authenticity often deployed in feminist and post-colonial readings of women's narratives, is too narrow a construct to be productive in literary scholarship.' Ibid., 75.

⁶¹ *Discourses of Slavery and Abolition Britain and its Colonies, 1760-1838*, ed. by Brycchan Carey, Markman Ellis and Sara Salih (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 125.

⁶² Ibid. Hanley agrees that most scholars have therefore conceded the 'impossibility of completely retrieving Prince's essential "authentic voice" from the narrative, since the published version is the only one to have survived.' Hanley, *Beyond Slavery*, p. 77.

⁶³ Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo, *Black Cosmopolitanism: Racial Consciousness and Transnational Identity in the Nineteenth-Century Americas* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), p. 162.

⁶⁴ Ibid. The question of community is discussed in 1.2.

⁶⁵ Scholar Lean'tin Bracks also notes the influences of European editorial and cultural context on Prince's text. 'Much of what Mary Prince tells in her narrative is tempered by religious and abolitionist goals, but Mary's unique voice can still be heard,' Lean'tin L. Bracks, *Writings on Black Women of the Diaspora: History, Language, and Identity* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), p. 41. Bracks situates her reading of Mary Prince's narrative at a nexus of ancestry, family, and African memory, emphasizing the role of Prince's relationship with and separation from her family as well as the role of Africa in establishing identity.

⁶⁶ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 131.

This intersection is, according to Caribbean literature scholar Sandra Pouchet Paquet, writing in 2002, ‘a site of resistance and accommodation between different traditions, languages, and cultures, between Europe and Africa in the Caribbean and in Great Britain.’⁶⁷ In *The History of Mary Prince*, much remains of Prince’s imagery and vernacular, and Paquet emphasises that although print capitalism inevitably shapes autobiographical self-consciousness in the narrative, Prince’s ‘voice and identity are already in place’ when she narrates her story to Strickland. ‘Her narrative retains a qualitative uniqueness that is distinctly West Indian,’ states Paquet.⁶⁸ Part of this distinctiveness is Prince’s tendency to dramatize her actions by means of speech acts that transform her audience into witnesses. In this example, she relates the events of the day she finally left Mr and Mrs Wood, her British owners’ service, in London, after many instances of manipulation and provocation. She calls upon others to attest to her actions, making a form of declaration to the domestics, as her trunk is being picked up by the coachman:

Stop, before you take this trunk, and hear what I have to say before these people. I am going out of this house, as I was ordered; but I have done no wrong at all to my owners. [...] I always worked very hard to please them, both by night and day; but [...] my mistress could never be satisfied with reasonable service. This is the fourth time; and now I am going out.⁶⁹

This public declaration of recrimination and self-justification, as Paquet points out, takes the Woods’ private space and ‘makes it a public space in a speech act that mocks their ownership in a series of verbal assaults.’⁷⁰ Forms of ritualised oral dexterity are explored in Chapter One, where I investigate Prince’s performative voice in the context of linguistic flexibility and selective use of language, asking how she was able to balance concealment and disclosure, deploy mimicry and practice duplicity, as well as encode details of her suffering, despite censorship by the abolitionists. Within the narrow social and legal confines of metropolitan society, what strategies did Prince enact to enable her to produce the degree of legitimacy and authority required to make claims on behalf of all enslaved people? How was she able to display, being subject to the exigencies of the narrative and its editors, an attitude and language of submission, whilst espousing an ideology of liberation?

The slave or freedom narrative genre anchored itself in the tropes of Christian conversion, borrowing extensively from the language of the Bible to construct an ideology of liberation, and converting the Christian tenets of salvation into disruptive strategies for radical social

⁶⁷ Sandra Pouchet Paquet, *Caribbean Autobiography: Cultural Identity and Self-Representation* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), p. 36.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁶⁹ Ferguson, *The History*, p. 90.

⁷⁰ Paquet continues: ‘Whether you call this *signifying* (as an African American would) or *ramachez* (as a Trinidadian would), such a speech performance is a ritual feature of black talk, and Prince is a practiced performer.’ Paquet, p. 38.

interpellation. Christianity itself, however, represented a site of ambivalence and challenge: how was Prince able to deploy the very biblical text which had so often been wielded as the instrument of her and her fellow West Indians' repression?⁷¹ The re-telling of her conversion, with its attendant feelings of shame and humility, is described in detail in *The History*, in terms such as: 'I felt sorry for my sins also. I cried the whole night, but I was too much ashamed to speak. I prayed God to forgive me.'⁷² Such exhibitions of contrition and mortification were pre-requisites of the slave narrative; as such it is impossible to gauge Prince's sincerity; however, notes of ambivalence remain in the text, which I will explore in this chapter. Prince's instrumental use of first the Methodist and then the Moravian church for education, socialisation, and even to express rebellion, are discernible in the text despite the conventional nature of Prince's Christianisation. Moreover, descriptions of her rebellious, forthright and resourceful character elsewhere in the narrative, alongside anecdotal reports from members of the Pringle household, preclude and even contradict the meek, self-abasing persona depicted in the above quotation. This chapter will interrogate how Prince exploited the categories of Christianity, capitalising on the contradictions inherent in dissenting Protestantism in order to maximise her credibility in the eyes of her sponsors and readers. It will investigate the ways in which Prince's text 'performed' the version of Christianity that her editor required, in order to lend credibility to her subsequent claims.

Similarly, Chapter One discusses Prince's text within the context of discourses of sensibility, exploring how it uses sentimental rhetoric to elevate to a moral virtue the ability to identify with and respond to the sufferings of others. Although sentimental rhetoric as a persuasive force in anti-slavery politics and its literary productions had reached its height in the early 1790s, and thereafter sentimental writings faced much criticism, eighteenth-century scholar of sensibility Markman Ellis maintains that this merely altered the terms of the debate, and that sentimentalism was not a spent force. Rather, he concludes, moments of criticism tended to 'testify to the continued force of sentimentalism, providing the channel for its transmutation into powerful forms of political argument and literary production in the nineteenth century and beyond.'⁷³ Both the structure, and the content of many slave and freedom narratives conform to a sentimental mode of representation, drawing on two cornerstones of the applied ethics of Enlightenment culture: appealing to the readers' empathy, and their sense of moral responsibility. Stephen Ahern, editor of the 2013 collection *Affect and Abolition in the Anglo-Atlantic, 1770–1830*, summarises the characteristics of this mode as, variously, the text's fragmentation and repetition, its spatial and temporal unity, its preoccupation with the present and its episodic nature. Ahern asserts that these are all 'formal characteristics of a mode driven by the need to produce maximum affective

⁷¹ Some planters saw Christian doctrine as a tool to teach obedience or reinforce the categories of colonial domination. Church and missionary activity in the West Indies is described in detail in 1.4.

⁷² Ferguson, *The History*, p. 83.

⁷³ Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 221.

impact.⁷⁴ The structure of the *History*, as well as many of its linguistic, typographic and visual elements, accords with this delineation. Prince calls upon the reader / spectator to witness both her spoken story and the effects of her brutal mistreatment on her body, setting up a dynamic of spectatorship between herself, her counterpart Susanna Strickland, and the reader – a dynamic which has multiple implications.

The collaboration between Prince and Strickland raises many questions about both the process of mediation and filtering enacted on *The History of Mary Prince*, and the impact of issues of gender on the text. As Salih repeatedly underlines, Susanna Strickland's 'somewhat ghostly presence in The History is crucial, since it entirely destabilizes the notion of Prince as the sole 'author' of the text.'⁷⁵ While we cannot appreciate or delineate the definitive influence of the amanuensis, some conjectural assumptions can be made, using historical contextual information about gendered anti-slavery activity. Susanna Strickland lodged at the house of Thomas Pringle, secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society, and is known to have had abolitionist sympathies.⁷⁶ She may have signed petitions – from 1830 to 1833, women were responsible for the two largest of these: one of which, the National Female Petition had 187,157 signatures.⁷⁷ White British middle-class women, as historian Clare Midgley explains in *Women Against Slavery*, played a key part in introducing slavery into the public consciousness in the era of abolition. This was despite being outside the scope of the franchise, and as such, without political power.⁷⁸ As a result of pressure from provincial Ladies societies, national anti-slavery policy changed in 1831 from its gradualist stance to calls for immediate emancipation.⁷⁹ This led the campaigner George Thompson to write of women, in 1834: 'Where they existed they did everything [...] in a word they formed the cement of the whole anti-slavery building – without their aid we should never have been united.'⁸⁰

⁷⁴ *Affect and Abolition in the Anglo-Atlantic, 1770–1830*, ed. by Stephen Ahern (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), p.6.

⁷⁵ Carey, Ellis and Salih, p. 132.

⁷⁶ One of her letters reads: 'I have given away most of your Prospectuses but I am sorry to say with no success.' Quoted in Ferguson, *The History*, p. 26. Hanley states that Strickland became a lifelong abolitionist after her time with Prince and Pringle. Hanley, *Beyond Slavery*, p. 87. He also draws attention to her later 'insertion of outright abolitionist polemic into children's literature.' *Ibid.*, p.83.

⁷⁷ Midgley, p. 65. Women were excluded from petitioning parliament, although this censure was increasingly ignored.

⁷⁸ Seymour Drescher states that after 1823 'the direct participation of women became massive and decisive' in securing progressive abolitionist victories in popular opinion and legislature. Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 250.

⁷⁹ The gradualist approach was espoused by anti-slavery at all levels, for ideological or practical reasons, or both. The Sheffield Female Society first embraced immediatism and rejected the apprenticeship system, followed by the men's provincial groups and eventually London's. Midgley, pp. 103-108. Elizabeth Heyrick was the first woman to demand enslaved people's 'right' to liberty; she branded gradual abolition the 'very masterpiece of satanic policy', and labelled slave insurrection 'self defence'. *Ibid.*, pp. 103-108.

⁸⁰ Letter from George Thompson to Anne Knight, 14 November 1834, Friends House Library, London, Box W. This female prominence was achieved despite the opprobrium of men such as William Wilberforce. He wrote in January 1826: 'For ladies to meet, to publish, to go from house to house stirring up petitions – these appear to me proceedings unsuited to the female character, as delineated in scripture.'

Female anti-slavery activists also capitalised on their power as consumers, exemplified by their abstention from slave-grown produce such as sugar.⁸¹ Operating within the patriarchy, however, required an element of strategy. During a century where women were increasingly being invoked as arbiters of public taste, with or without their consent, some may have used contemporary representations of the 'female' character to mask and manoeuvre their impulses, making a virtue of the necessity for modesty and purity. Thus, instead of challenging the economic, legal and personal restrictions they were under, women often turned them into permissions, or pockets of liberty and autonomy. They claimed to approach the subject of slavery 'through the pure medium of virtuous pity, unmixed with those political, commercial and selfish considerations which operated in steeling the hearts of some men against the pleadings of humanity.'⁸² Many women qualified their association with abolitionist activities by highlighting their gender, with its special suitability to intervene in matters of the heart. Prevailing patriarchal narratives dictated that it was a woman's 'natural' role to exhibit 'special sensibility, which worked in tandem with men's practical skills to make up the complementary tools of abolitionism.'⁸³

Moreover, approximately one quarter of all anti-slavery literature was produced by women.⁸⁴ Much of it relied heavily on the production of sympathy whilst simultaneously reducing the enslaved to a unified, homogenised whole. Moira Ferguson, in her extensive 1992 study of women's abolitionist writing, *Subject to Others*, offers the example of Hannah More's 'Slavery, a poem' of 1788, which constructs 'an unproblematised victim who dwells in indeterminate landscapes with no culture or history.'⁸⁵ The model was used and copied for countless other depictions of the enslaved. Ferguson argues that women producing poetry and prose during this period applied colonial slavery as a specific referent to their own circumstances. Female anti-slavery activity, she contends, was refracted through a gendered lens, with British women writers displacing 'anxieties about their own assumed powerlessness and inferiority onto their representations of the enslaved, conjuring an objectified, silenced other in need of pity and protection.'⁸⁶

This projection of self-perceived cultural impotence onto the enslaved was facilitated by a range of literary and historical accounts in which slavery became less a real life institution and more a set of familiar, pre-conceived references. Moreover, the problematic dynamic of

Robert Isaac and Samuel Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce*, Vol. V (London: John Murray, 1840). Quotation from a letter dated 31st January 1826, p. 264.

⁸¹ Consumer boycotts undercut any need for parliamentary involvement, and the emphasis on self denial and moral rectitude lent it an appropriately modest public face.

⁸² From an article in *Critical Review*, February 1789, 237, quoted in Moira Ferguson, *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670-1834* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 163.

⁸³ Midgley, p. 35.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁸⁵ Ferguson, *Subject to Others*, p. 146.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

spectatorship set up by this anti-slavery literature, which is characterised by the making or bestowing of humanity through sympathetic witness, risks simply reproducing gendered and racialised privilege. Scholar Saidiya Hartman has argued that the practice of empathy can exploit the captive body, eliding genuine understanding of the other's pain and sometimes descending into a distasteful savouring of spectacle. Hartman's work explores the 'difficulty and slipperiness of empathy', discussing the ways in which 'the recognition of humanity and individuality acts to tether, bind and oppress.'⁸⁷ Stephen Ahern agrees that sentimental representation of suffering can be 'marked by recurring problems, at times veering into a distasteful savouring of the spectacle of the body in pain, at others working to naturalise the master-slave bond, or to celebrate a quality of raw animal sensation that dehumanizes the non-European.'⁸⁸

Such was the literary and social context in which Strickland encountered Mary Prince, whose ambition to write an autobiographical account of an enslaved Black woman residing in Britain was without precedent.⁸⁹ Prince, as Henry Louis Gates tells us, was 'the female slave who hitherto fore had been spoken for but who had not yet spoken *for herself*.'⁹⁰ It may not have previously occurred to Strickland to imagine that Black people could attain agency in a meaningful or morally acceptable way. Black intervention or influence was devalued and freedom was granted as a gift by white philanthropists, who left class relations undisturbed. In writing this text with Prince, Strickland was confronted by an 'African' who embodied the disruption of the causality that is assumed to run from metropole to colony. What happens to the dynamic of spectatorship when the sympathetic witness is confronted by a West Indian woman who directly contradicts the abolitionist moral fable – the victim who seeks to obtain God-given freedom – by becoming a fellow activist? As we have seen, any hypotheses about Strickland's influence on the narrative – its structure, language and content – is unfeasible; however, the text itself offers several clues as to how Prince was able to defy the categories of colonial hegemony and become a published author. Her resilient personality is readable in much of the story; she is also characterised by Pringle as 'industrious', with 'natural sense' and a 'quickness of observation and discrimination of character', as well as having a good dose of 'natural pride'.⁹¹ This chapter will interrogate Prince's deployment of strategies of resistance, using instances from her life to argue that she seizes authority in a number of ways. As well as managing her own business affairs, she stands up to acts of cruelty and rebels against her 'owners'. Through multiple defiant speech acts in the domestic arena, she exploits and inverts the power dynamic between herself and her mistress, in

⁸⁷ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 5.

⁸⁸ Ahern, p. 1.

⁸⁹ Pringle notes in the Preface: 'The idea of writing Mary Prince's history was first suggested by herself.' There seems to be no reason to doubt this representation of Prince's motives. Ferguson, *The History*, p. 55.

⁹⁰ Gates, *Classic Slave Narratives*, p. 9.

⁹¹ In the Supplement, in Ferguson, *The History*, p. 115.

order to undermine Mrs Wood and forward her own projects. Finally, she not only persuades the Woods to bring her to Britain, but once arrived, frees herself from slavery and convinces the abolitionists to publish her story.

Another way in which Prince defies authority is through her control, albeit strictly limited, over what happens to her body. The narrative reveals occasions when the enslaved woman managed to retain a degree of control over the worst excesses of abuse inflicted on her person. As a young teenager, she runs away from her master, telling him that she can ‘stand the floggings no longer.’⁹² Similarly, later in life, she faces up to another cruel master, recording that she ‘thought it was high time to do so.’⁹³ Arguably, Prince is also able to deploy bodily limitations to withhold her labour, and thus reduce her master or mistress’s investment in, and power over her person. The first chapter of this thesis will close with a consideration of the ways in which Mary Prince is able to instrumentalise her body, and the subsequent dramatization of these instances in the text. Enslaved women’s bodies were caught up in the political economy of slavery in multiple ways, as historian Hilary Beckles explains. The status of slave passed through the woman, hence she literally ‘made the slave system function’ through sexual reproduction.⁹⁴ For this, and a variety of other reasons outlined by Beckles in his 1999 study *Centering Woman*, refusing a white master’s sexual advances was rarely an option. However, as Beckles argues, ‘a considerable degree of socio-sexual autonomy [could be] achieved by some slave women with respect to particular relationships.’⁹⁵ This autonomy could range from being given gifts and advantages to, in rare cases, manumission. Prince had a number of relationships, only one of which is explicitly identified as sexual in *The History* – that with her husband, Daniel James.⁹⁶ Although in the text Prince refers to a number of men who are willing to buy her freedom, she was unable to expound upon or elucidate the nature of those relationships, due to the prevailing requirement for moral propriety.

The absence of opportunities to describe this channelling of her agency imposed restrictive limitations on Prince’s ability to particularise the resistance she was able to enact through the paradigm of sexual relations. What she was able to articulate, however, is the impact of enslavement upon her physical body. The centrality of bodily suffering in *The History*, and the invocation of physical pain to inspire empathy, initiates the question of the implementation of the body as a form of proof. Prince’s physical body was ‘shown’ to the ladies of the Pringle household in order to verify her claims of abuse.⁹⁷ Unfortunately, no record exists of Prince’s feelings about this invasive act of appropriation, although it is very likely that she underwent numerous similar

⁹² Ibid., p. 70.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 78.

⁹⁴ Beckles, p. 8.

⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 40.

⁹⁶ We know of at least two more: see 1.6.

⁹⁷ See 1.6.

incidents throughout her life. The performative opportunity presented by her physical person mirrors Prince's sufferings as they appear on the page, through the invocation of empathy by the written word. Perhaps most importantly, this designation of the body as a text, or a dramatic script, parallels the ontology of the narrative itself. Chapter One will therefore conclude with a consideration of how Prince's person literally enables and embodies the content of the text.

0.5 Raising his voice: '*That notorious firebrand*', Robert Wedderburn¹

In *The History of Mary Prince*, the narrator places herself at the centre of the slavery question. A common trait of slave and freedom narratives, this foregrounding of the self is a metonymic strategy she shares with Robert Wedderburn, who had arrived in Britain from Jamaica around fifty years earlier. In focusing on questions of identity, both Prince and Wedderburn elected to perform the self, embodying their resistance to the dehumanizing history of enslavement. However, whereas Mary Prince, under the auspices and influence of the Anti-Slavery Society, produced a single life narrative, Robert Wedderburn, despite publishing various writings, invariably chose to communicate orally, through preaching and debating in London halls and chapels. While Prince consistently personalised the experience of enslavement – bringing its lived realities to the reader through detailed descriptions of domestic life and everyday relations – Wedderburn extrapolated the personal into a sweeping rhetorical dramatization of his demands that encompassed religious free-thought, anti-slavery and ultra-radical politics. Where Prince deployed Christianity to attain dignity and legitimacy, and to force acknowledgement of her subjectivity, Wedderburn exploited the rhetoric and dynamics of spiritual discourse, not only for self-fashioning but to delineate his arguments for political and social reform. Whereas Prince borrowed from discourses of sentimentality, strategizing a simple, unaffected and personal style, Wedderburn's chiliastic, anarchic preaching employed a carnival theatricality, using oral dexterity, performance and spectacle in the public space to get his ideas across. Prince directed her appeals to the English people as a unified entity (albeit tacitly directed, by the abolitionists, at a female audience) whom she constructed as unwittingly complicit, and bound to rally to her cause once they were fully apprised of the dreadful realities of colonial slavery. Wedderburn, on the other hand, focused his fire almost exclusively on a political and clerical elite whom he believed made it their business systematically to oppress the poor, both at home and abroad.

¹ The Home Secretary Lord Sidmouth promised the Prince Regent in 1819 that he would prosecute 'that notorious firebrand, Wedderburne'. Quoted in Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London 1795-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 134.

Both West Indians could be said to have ‘staged’ themselves, as ex-enslaved people, in the ‘theatre’ of the British metropole in the early nineteenth century. Whilst their methods for engaging with questions of freedom display many contrasts, they also share numerous parallels. Just as Mary Prince’s published presence was carefully curated by and mediated through the abolitionists, Wedderburn’s output also relied to a degree on collaboration with others, mainly drawn from the ultra-radical political circles he moved in. Both Prince and Wedderburn, in different ways, spoke not only for and about themselves, but on behalf of all enslaved people. Both were unequivocal in articulating a demand for immediate and universal emancipation. The work of both exhibits, according to scholar of Romanticism Helen Thomas, consciousness of the ‘need to perform and promote narratives of truths (cultural and historical) under the guise of divine witness.’² However, whereas Prince’s religious ambitions were limited to attending church and praying regularly, Wedderburn interpolated most of his activities through a religious paradigm.³ This prompts the question: as an ordained Unitarian preacher, to what extent could Wedderburn exploit the language of the Bible as a counterweight to colonial discourses of slavery? What strategies did he implement and which discourses did he mobilise to reach his metropolitan audience? How did his voice and his performance of the self differ from Prince’s? Chapter Two of this thesis examines Robert Wedderburn’s theatrical voice, investigating how he embodied dramatic performativity and oral dexterity to antagonise the hegemonic literary establishment. It argues that Wedderburn drew on an ‘intertextual’ self, syncretising West African and West Indian influences; and explores the possibility that he capitalised on his cultural heritage to ‘creolize’ and ‘carnivalize’ the discourses that he deployed and spaces he moved in, deploying a parodic, dialogic voice to destabilise notions of fixed products in literature and culture.

Robert Wedderburn expressed his anti-establishment political ideas largely through the medium of religion: an eccentric, neologistic and highly individual iteration of Christianity which combined Unitarianism and Spencean agrarianism.⁴ In contrast to Equiano, Cugoano and Sancho, Wedderburn’s near-contemporaries of African descent with literary and social justice ambitions, he did not cultivate relationships with middle-class white abolitionists, or enjoy support from wealthy sponsors.⁵ Eschewing literacy, Wedderburn did not endeavour to add to his education, prove his respectability, or demonstrate the ‘civility of the Negro’. He did not petition or supplicate, he issued demands, exemplified by this quote from his 1817 periodical *The Axe Laid*

² Helen Thomas, *Romanticism and Slave Narratives: Transatlantic Testimonies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 179.

³ Pringle describes Prince’s religious knowledge as ‘still but very limited, and her views of Christianity indistinct.’ Ferguson, *The History*, p. 116.

⁴ Thomas Spence, 1750-1814, was a Newcastle-born radical revolutionary communitarian who campaigned for land rights, as well as those of women and children.

⁵ See 0.1 and 0.3 for references to Equiano and Cugoano. Ignatius Sancho was an ex-enslaved composer, actor and writer, whose correspondence with Laurence Sterne and posthumously published letters secured his reputation among abolitionists as symbolic of the humanity of the African and the immorality of the slave trade.

to the Root: ‘Wedderburn demands, in the name of God, in the name of natural justice, and in the name of humanity, that *all* slaves be set free’⁶ As Helen Thomas explains in *Romanticism and Slave Narratives*, this presents ‘a significant departure from the cultural acquiescence suggested by other slave narrative [writers]’.⁷

This distinctiveness may be partly due to Wedderburn’s background. Son of an enslaved woman called Roseanna, he had grown up witnessing the mistreatment, at the hands of their white masters, of both his mother and his African-born grandmother Talkee Amy, who was his principal carer. These were experiences he frequently returned to, citing his mother as the origin of his anti-authoritarian disposition. His characteristic idiolect and eccentric vernacular was formed partly in childhood, but also in the navy, which he joined aged around sixteen, his language being shaped among the subversive, fluid and transnational constituency of seafarers. Thereafter, as a dual-heritage West Indian who lived most of his life on the poverty-line in a London slum, Wedderburn favoured a milieu of artisans, performers, pornographers and prostitutes. Nicknamed the ‘Black Prince’, his theatrical flair came to the attention of the radical press-man Richard Carlile, who attributed the Jamaican’s popularity to his ‘powerful eccentricity of manner’ coupled with ‘great natural ability.’⁸ The linguistic crucible offered by the languages of his childhood, the salty inflections of sailors and the idiolect of the metropole contributed to Wedderburn’s idiosyncratic rhetoric, which he deployed to satirise and lampoon the establishment. His dramatic, burlesque performances gained him a reputation as politically dangerous; such that Lord Sidmouth, the then Home Secretary labelled him a ‘notorious firebrand.’

As a dissenting preacher, Wedderburn’s rejection of the established church was based in a fundamental belief in the radical nature of Christ; he maintained that this radicalism imbued him with the authority to criticise the Bible. Furthermore he extended this immunity from heavenly censure into the right to repudiate earthly laws. The ribald debate and impious, seditious rhetoric filling the cramped space of Wedderburn’s hayloft chapel in Soho landed him in jail on two separate occasions.⁹ His religious, as well as his political convictions, were thus inextricable from his theatricality, all of which were inseparable from his marginalisation from society. Helen

⁶ Robert Wedderburn, *The Axe Laid to the Root or a Fatal Blow to Oppressors, Being an Address to the Planters and Negroes of the Island of Jamaica*, No. 1 (1817), in McCalman, *Horrors*, p. 81. The origin of this short-lived journal’s name is probably from Thomas Paine’s *Age of Reason*: ‘Lay then the *axe* to the *root*, and teach governments humanity’; and/or from Shelley’s poem *Queen Mab*: ‘Let the *axe* / Strike at the *root*, the *poison-tree* will fall’ (which in turn possibly alludes to William Blake’s poem *The Poison Tree*). The analogy may have been commonly used in a slavery context: Thomas Clarkson wrote that abolishing the slave trade would be ‘laying the *axe* at the very *root*’ of the institution of slavery. Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament*, Vols I-II (London: Longmans, 1808), p. 286.

⁷ Helen Thomas, p. 265.

⁸ McCalman, *Horrors*, p. 24.

⁹ One of these spells in jail affords us a rare description of Wedderburn’s appearance: ‘A man of colour, broad nostrils, a cut on the left side of the forehead, a slight cut across the bridge of the nose. Lusty.’ From Dorchester Prison records, quoted in Hanley, *Beyond Slavery*, p. 220.

Thomas argues that for many marginalised people during the Romantic era, the ‘dynamic language of [...] spiritual/linguistic excess evoked an aura of performance which articulated and transformed their position of estrangement and isolation.’¹⁰ This chapter will examine the components of this dynamic performativity: how did Wedderburn’s rejection of literacy and chiliastic, politicised iteration of Christianity contribute to the construction of his ultra-radical political voice? How did the foregrounding of oral forms and theatrical spectacle work to destabilise prevailing hegemonic political and hermeneutic discourses? Unfortunately, since Wedderburn expressed himself chiefly through the oral mode, little remains of his work, and we must rely for the content of his speeches mainly on the partisan reports of government spies. Much of this material, as well as many of the published texts are collected in Iain McCalman’s 1991 biography, the primary source used here to examine Wedderburn’s theatrical and performative voice.

An important academic context for positioning Wedderburn’s allegiances is offered by Black Atlantic Studies, which calls attention to the character of Black expressive cultural forms that develop in the syncretic and transnational contexts of colonial and post-colonial societies. For Alan Rice, scholar of the Black Atlantic, ‘Robert Wedderburn turns his doubled national allegiance [...] to his political advantage, combining a vernacular Caribbean perspective with a demotic metropolitan dynamic to create a truly unique political discourse.’¹¹ His syncretic, ultra-radical philosophy has led Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh, in their wide-ranging history of sailors, slaves and commoners of the revolutionary Atlantic, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, to claim that: ‘He overcame the dualities of religion and secularism by synthesising radical Christianity and Painite republicanism, combining both with a proletarian abolitionism.’¹² This synthesising tendency was characterised in part by Wedderburn’s propensity to delineate concrete links between the circumstances of the working poor in Britain with those of the enslaved in the West Indies. One of the principal ways he did this was to identify and denounce British elites, accusing the same people of perpetrating oppression on both sides of the Atlantic:

Government was necessitated to send men in arms to West Indies or Africa [...] to steal females [...] vessels would be in readiness and they would fly off with them. This was done by parliament men - who done it for gain – the same as they employed them in their cotton factories to make Slaves of them to become possessed of money.¹³

¹⁰ Helen Thomas, p. 51.

¹¹ Alan Rice, *Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic* (London: Continuum, 2003), p. 12.

¹² Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), p. 290.

¹³ PRO HO 42/195, Hopkins Street Chapel, [9 Aug 1819], deposition of Sd. J. Bryant, (spy) in McCalman, *Horrors*, p. 114. The parliament men and factory owners he is accusing may well have been part of the established abolitionist movement. This is often given as one reason for many working-class radicals’ eventual disillusionment with abolitionism. See 2.3.

Parallels between colonial chattel slavery and metropolitan wage slavery were frequently drawn in the era of abolition, serving as a fruitful comparison to support a variety of divergent ideological positions.¹⁴ However, Robert Wedderburn went further, representing himself as the embodiment of radical discourses on both sides of the Atlantic: he used the experiences of his family to resist colonial narratives of enslavement, and his lived experience in Britain to speak on behalf of the working poor in the metropole. This willingness to fuse the ideals of ultra-radical politics in Britain with calls for the emancipation of the enslaved abroad formed much of the basis of his parodic performances. In the uneasy atmosphere of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century political repression, Wedderburn staged theatrical debates with titles such as ‘Can it be Murder to Kill a Tyrant?’ The motion proposed in this 1819 debate was ‘Has a slave an inherent right to slay his master?’, a question which was almost certainly intended as an encoded call for insurrection in Britain.¹⁵

This allegorical methodology enabled Robert Wedderburn to implement radical calls for reform that drew on his origins, collocating discourses of suffering gleaned from his experiences on both sides of the Atlantic. His African heritage remained important throughout his life: he never stopped calling himself ‘the offspring of an African slave’, and ‘an oppressed, insulted, and degraded African.’¹⁶ Rather, according to African history scholar Nadine Hunt, Wedderburn’s Black consciousness and African identity crystallised and intensified during his time in Britain. Hunt argues that as an anti-slavery activist:

Wedderburn learned that a connection to Africa allowed him to speak and write credibly on behalf of other ‘Africans’ like himself and his brother, mother and grandmother. As a

¹⁴ Radicals pressing for reform of working practices in England often compared chattel slavery favourably with wage slavery. See Richard Oastler, *Infant Slavery: Report of a Speech, Delivered in Favour of the Ten Hours' Bill, by Richard Oastler, Esq. at a Numerous Meeting Held at Preston, on the 22nd of March, 1833, with Extracts from His Speech at Bolton* (1833), JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/60229948. [Accessed 26 May 2020]. The working poor were also invoked by slavery apologists to expose the hypocrisy of anti-slavery advocates. They argued that abolitionists’ humanitarian concern for the enslaved ignored the effect banning the trade would have on English workers. ‘Would the house say, that the justice they would extend to the Africans, they would refuse to their own countrymen?’ Gascoyne, in Hansard, 10th June 1806, Vol. 7, 592. The writing of William Beckford Jr., whose family had made vast profits from Jamaican colonial holdings, exemplifies this argument. He declares that if Great Britain ‘be seriously bent on humanity, let it [...] reform at home before it ventures to make romantic trials of compassion abroad! [...] Let it look into the state of the parochial, and [...] the extra-parochial poor.’ *Remarks Upon the Situation of Negroes in Jamaica, impartially made from a local experience of nearly thirteen years in the island* (1788), in Kitson, Vol. 2, p. 270. Tory radicals were also concerned with proving that the labouring masses of Britain were more disadvantaged than any other group, including colonial slaves. See Marcus Wood, ‘William Cobbett, John Thelwall, Radicalism, Racism and Slavery: A Study in Burkean Parodics’, *Romanticism on the Net*, No. 15 (August 1999) <https://doi.org/10.7202/005873ar> [Accessed 26 May 2020].

¹⁵ A witness interpreted the question under debate as ‘whether it be right for the people of England to assassinate their Rulers, for this I perceive to be the real purport of the question tho’ proposed in other terms.’ McCalman, *Horrors*, p. 116.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 131; p. 44.

consequence, he developed his African identity by involving Africa through his grandmother's and mother's enslavement in Jamaica.¹⁷

The 'doubled national allegiance' referred to by Alan Rice above, was therefore embodied by Wedderburn's African and Jamaican Creole roots, as well as his Scottish ancestry. The formation of 'Creole' culture in the West Indies has been the subject of much scholarship, originating in large part with the Barbadian poet-historian [Edward] Kamau Braithwaite's foundational text, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica*. This work enabled an understanding of late eighteenth century Jamaican society and culture as formed and catalysed by the encounter between the mainly British and West African populace:

Here in Jamaica, fixed within the dehumanizing institution of slavery, were two cultures of people having to adapt themselves to a new environment, and to each other. The friction created by this confrontation was cruel, but it was also creative.¹⁸

In Braithwaite's model, the process of creolization consists of the twin forces of acculturation – the absorption of one culture by another (in this case the dominated slave/African by the dominant European) – and interculturalization: a more reciprocal and spontaneous process of mixing that comes about by and through imitation, indigenisation, language and sexual relationships.¹⁹ Creolization as noted in relation to cultural production is most commonly, however, an unpredictable, fragmented dynamic that defies definitive narrative categorisation. Cuban novelist and essayist Antonio Benítez-Rojo underlines this resistance to definition:

Creolization does not transform literature or music or language into a synthesis or anything that could be taken in essentialist terms, nor does it lead these expressions into a predictable state of creolization. Rather, creolization is a term with which we attempt to explain the unstable states that a Caribbean cultural object presents over time.²⁰

It is therefore with due caution that this chapter will discuss creolization as a paradigm through which to articulate the epistemology and ontology of Wedderburn's cultural output. Robert Wedderburn's life-long propensity to syncretise religious, cultural and political discourses occurs in a lived context informed by lateral, creolizing models of encounter and exchange. The instability and dynamism of creolized forms are celebrated by Benítez-Rojo as follows: 'The plantation repeats itself endlessly in the different states of creolization that come out here and

¹⁷ Hunt, p. 180.

¹⁸ Edward Kamau Braithwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770-1820* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 307.

¹⁹ Edward Kamau Braithwaite, *Contradictory Omens: Cultural diversity and integration in the Caribbean* (Kingston: Savacou, 1974), p. 6.

²⁰ Antonio Benítez-Rojo, 'Three words towards Creolization' in *Caribbean Creolization: Reflections on the Cultural Dynamics of Language, Literature, and Identity*, ed. by Kathleen M. Balutansky and Marie-Agnes Sourieau (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), p. 55.

there in language and music, dance and literature, food and theatre. These elements are summed up in the Carnival.’²¹ In Jamaica, carnival forms survive in the shape of the folkdance festival Jonkonnu, or ‘John Canoe’, in which numerous folkloric characters interact in verse, song and dance. As cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter explains in her 1970 article *Jonkonnu in Jamaica*, Jonkonnu combines African and European traditional religious and artistic expressions in often unruly and parodic ways, incorporating masks, drums, dance and masquerades.²² Wedderburn’s subversive debates and grotesque theatricals ridiculed and critiqued political and clerical elites through what might now be read as carnivalesque humour and satire.²³ His performance of disruptive identities can be interpreted productively in the context of his multi-cultural and multi-locational heritage, which normalised creolisation and the incorporation of elements of the West African trickster and the Jamaican spirit of Jonkonnu, as well as the English eighteenth-century burlesque, into his performances.²⁴ Chapter Two will therefore conclude by arguing that such destabilising mimicry and mocking humour enabled Wedderburn to deploy his theatrical voice to express explicitly blasphemous and seditious political views, in a dramatic overturning of the dominant discourses of class and race.

0.6 Closer to the dialectics of life: Creative critical intersections ²⁵

The third chapter comprises the three stage plays, alongside an analysis of and reflection on the mutual points of exchange and connection between the critical and creative work of this thesis. From an initial grounding in investigations into performance and gender within discourses of slavery, the scope of this doctorate has expanded considerably, with both the creative and critical elements amplifying and diversifying in several directions. During the course of conducting research into Mary Prince and Robert Wedderburn, the Windrush scandal occurred, and it quickly became clear that engaging with the legacies of slavery and abolition in present-day Britain would be vital to the relevance and coherence of the project. Concurrently, it became increasingly

²¹ Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 56.

²² Wynter, Sylvia, ‘Jonkonnu in Jamaica: towards the interpretation of folk dance as a cultural process’, *Jamaica Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (June 1970), 34-48

²³ The rituals and celebrations of the carnival were first articulated as a form of literary expression by the Soviet scholar Mikhail Bakhtin, who identified the ‘carnavalesque’ as a disruptive, discursive modality deployed to undermine authority, in Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984). He read this literary mode as originating in European medieval religious festivals where eccentric, profane inversions of society’s strict and sacred order were sanctioned. This temporary inversion of norms allowed the expression and containment of rebellion.

²⁴ For an explanation of the trickster, see 2.2.

²⁵ ‘Drama is closer to the dialectics of life than poetry or fiction. [...] [It] encapsulates within itself this principle of the struggle of opposites which generates movement.’ N’gugi Wa Thiongo, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Curry, 1981), p. 54.

pressing to research my own ancestors and their effect on the geo-politics of the Caribbean and the United Kingdom. This multiplication of research objectives was reflected in the creative scope of the project: the trilogy of plays needed to dramatize a range of responses to slavery and abolition, generically as well as in terms of subject matter and scenario. Chapter Three attempts to elucidate some of the relevant theoretical and imaginative intersections between the three plays and the critical work that accompanies them, limiting the study of each to one or two key points of mutual interrogation. It does not, however, offer a comprehensive exegesis of critical performance theory, and is not intended as a detailed self-reflective analysis or extensive rendering of the theatrical decisions taken during this project.

Throughout the augmentation of the material and proliferation of intentions described above, the overarching focus of this project has remained the staging of histories and legacies of slavery and abolition from a post-colonial perspective. As drama scholar Joanne Tompkins explains in 'Performing History's Unsettling': in post-colonial studies, 're-figuring history remains one of the dominant tropes for the decolonisation of texts, bodies, minds, and nations, precisely because imperial agents maintained strict control over the interpretation of history, as a key mechanism for exerting authority over a people.'²⁶ Tompkins asserts that history as a means of exploring post-coloniality is 'a self-reflexive performance of cultural specificity, individual subjectivity, and theatricality.'²⁷ The twin properties of self-reflexivity and performance are enduring and persistent in post-colonial historical interpolations and descriptions. This is reflected in novelist and post-colonial academic N'gugi Wa Thiongo's statement that 'drama is closer to the dialectics of life than poetry or fiction'.²⁸ Wa Thiongo maintains that drama is a uniquely suitable medium for the representation and re-enactment of historical discourses. The notion of performance contains within it a percipient awareness of itself as an interpretation – one which must always apply to its audience for approval, or indeed risk their repudiation. The contingencies and uncertainties of reception are thus abidingly present in drama; plays stand or fall according to their ability to transmit meaning effectively. Coherent and compelling versions of historical narratives which enter into credible dialogues with their intended audiences, in the present time, are imperative in dramatic representations.

The cultural historian Greg Denning wrote frequently about this intersection between history and its performance. He argued that their simultaneous presence in any form always signalled that 'the past will not be replicated or repeated, but shaped, represented, staged, performed in some way other than it originally existed.'²⁹ The gap thus created, between received ideas / former representations of 'the past' and their dramatic transformation, I would suggest imparts a

²⁶ Joanne Tompkins, 'Performing History's Unsettling', in *Critical Theory and Performance*, ed. by Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), p. 71.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Thiongo, p. 54.

²⁹ Denning, Greg, *Performances* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. xiv.

responsibility to the playwright (and to a lesser extent the entire production team). This gap is filled on the one hand by critical, historical information, and on the other by imagination and inspiration. The three plays presented here all required different forms of research, some led by historical enquiry and others by a search for narrative resonance. Chapter Three will focus on one or two aspects of each play's formation, offering a discussion on thematic links with the critical research, rather than aspiring to a comparative analysis of theatrical form.

Mother Country emerged from the study of *The History of Mary Prince*, chiefly the compelling circumstances of its creation. As a text that was multiply-enacted on, dictated to a scribe, curated and published as propaganda, it is likely to have been subject to extensive mediation and re-interpretation. In considering the vexed context of its original production, it proved useful to draw upon scholar Peter Hulme's observations about the objectives of the post-colonial scholar. Hulme reminds us to read for the silences, ellipses and omissions in historical discourses. His foundational 1986 *Colonial Encounters* interpolates key historical texts using, broadly speaking, a Freudian model which claims to 'make a text speak more than it knows.'³⁰ In piecing together the written fragments of history, Hulme explains, the post-colonialist seeks to identify 'key locations in a text – cruxes, to extend a conventional term – where the text stutters in its articulation, and which can therefore be used as levers to open out the ideology of colonial discourse.'³¹ This identification of breaks, or hesitations in the smooth surface of historical discourses must be seized upon by the creative writer if they wish to work counter to dominant or accepted understandings of stories about the past. The novelist Andrea Levy articulates a similar desire in her introduction to *A Long Song*, set in nineteenth century Jamaica. She calls the process reading 'between the lines', in order to breathe life into imaginative re-creations of the past.³² For this fictionalised memoir of an enslaved woman, Levy was obliged to sift through research material produced almost exclusively by colonial administrators, planters, pro-slavery advocates and white abolitionists. To construct enslaved subjectivity, the novelist had to penetrate the layers of colonial discourse in the search for 'other' presences, meanings and implications.

This search is not always fruitful or unified. Denning warns that the act of attempting to re-imbue the past with 'those qualities of the present that it once possessed' is not an uncomplicated undertaking.³³ He writes: 'To give back to the past its present, one has to be a little humble about what one can know.'³⁴ In attempting to reconstruct the scenario of the writing of Prince's *History* for the play *Mother Country*, very little information was available, aside from the text itself and its paratextual material. Other contextual and historical information about colonial narratives of

³⁰ Hulme, Peter, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492–1797* (London: Routledge, 1986), p. 12.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Levy, Andrea, *A Long Song* (London: Headline, 2010), p. 411.

³³ Denning, p. xv.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

enslavement, alongside those of gendered anti-slavery activity in Britain, thus became important in order to vivify the characters of Prince and Strickland. Another important consideration in the imaginative re-visioning of Mary Prince's life was the extensive divergent literary and critical discourse that surrounds the *History*. Prince and her text have both been subjected to intense scrutiny, and often been mobilised to support a variety of critical positions on race and gender. The first part of Chapter Three will therefore interrogate some of the dramatic decision-making in the writing of *Mother Country* in the light of these literary and critical analyses. This will be followed by the script of the stage play.

Greg Denning states that history saturates every moment of our cultural existence. He argues that 'making sense of what has happened is how we live. We do it in all sorts of ways, we sing it, dance it, carve it, paint it, tell it, write it.'³⁵ The medium of theatre is able to tell stories of the past in multiple forms and modalities, including many of those that Denning delineates, in expressive combinations. Re-creating the world of Robert Wedderburn involved historical and literary research but also the pursuit of a suitable dramatic idiom to reflect the tenor of the turbulent times he lived through. Political repression and cultural diversity were two of the defining features of London at the turn of the nineteenth century. Satire and buffoonery were among the staple forms that Wedderburn and his companions employed to subvert the dominant political and cultural norms of the period. The play *Glorious Causes* exploits a syncretic impulse, embodied by Wedderburn himself, to amalgamate the formulations and conventions of the ballad opera with the animations of the carnivalesque idiom found in traditional folk forms such as those of Jamaican Jonkonnu and the Trinidad carnival. The second part of Chapter Three will elucidate the use of this conjunction of generic and dramatic modes in the chosen modalities of *Glorious Causes*, accompanied by the play's script.

Post-colonial Caribbean playwrights, such as Errol Hill, Earl Lovelace and Rawle Gibbons, incorporated traditional and ritual elements into their dramas, combining Carnival and Calypso with the theatre of the colonising culture to express dissent and difference.³⁶ Jamaican playwright Dennis Scott's epic play *An Echo in the Bone* dramatizes stories of enslavement and colonial power through a multi-dimensional scenario based around the Caribbean ritual of Nine Night.³⁷ The critic John Thieme's reading of this play describes its intentionality in relation to the re-telling of history thus: 'Drama becomes the medium through which the past can be imaginatively re-enacted, so that scenes from the culturally encoded discourse of colonial historiography are given a completely different inflection.'³⁸ *Glorious Causes* attempts to emulate this re-

³⁵ Ibid., p. xiv.

³⁶ See for instance *Jestina's Calypso* by Earl Lovelace and *A Calypso Trilogy* by Rawle Gibbons.

³⁷ See 3.3.

³⁸ John Thieme, 'Repossessing the Slave Past: Caribbean Historiography and Dennis Scott's *An Echo in the Bone*' in *Theatre and Slavery: Ghosts at the Crossroads*, ed. by Michael Walling (Enfield: Border Crossings, 2007), 42-52.

formulation of historical narratives through creative interpretation, harnessing the carnivalesque to energise, animate and inspire the structure, stylistics and storytelling of the play.

The third play in the trilogy, *Free Women of Dominica Bathing in a Stream*, traces the legacies of slavery and abolition in Britain in the present day. Underlying the intention and focus of this play is Dening's assertion that: 'History – the past transcribed into words and signs – is the way we experience the present. We make sense of the present in our consciousness of the past.'³⁹ As such it was necessary to conduct several strands of research, including the impact of discourses of slavery on race relations in Britain, the current state of reparations, and the effects of PTSS in the field of epigenetics.⁴⁰ This section of Chapter Three focuses, however, on just two of these lines of enquiry, the first of which is an assessment of present apprehensions of the institutions of slavery and abolition in Britain – political, social and cultural. This necessitated an investigation into cultural and creative responses, principally through a survey of public and academic reactions to the 2007 bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade. It also involved an engagement with portrayals of slavery and abolition in theatre, film and television.

The second strand marked a departure from the previous work of this thesis, in that it entailed a detailed examination of some of the master discourses of colonialism in the Caribbean. My ancestor Sir William Young (2nd Baronet) features in the historical scenes in *Free Women of Dominica*. His father, also Sir William Young (1st Baronet), was the first British governor of the colony of Dominica in 1763. His role as land commissioner on the Ceded islands included apportioning land on St Vincent, hence Young was involved in the subjugation, harassment, exile and eventually, virtual extermination of the so-called 'Black Caribs' of that island.⁴¹ The baronet brought with him an Italian painter, Agostino Brunias, whose work has become synonymous with classically-infused colonial portraits of harmonious plantation life, where people of colour stroll through Europeanised landscapes, and well-dressed enslaved characters gather in marketplaces to socialise. Brunias remained in Dominica for a period after Young's departure and is said to have had a family there, whose descendants survive to this day. His paintings have undergone a process of post-colonial reclamation, coming to symbolise the island and its people in a range of touristic and domestic settings. The intriguing life and work of this painter who produced, at a generous estimate, only three surviving portraits of his benefactor, whilst churning out hundreds of pictures and engravings of women of colour, inspires multiple questions over whether and in what ways

³⁹ Dening, p. xv.

⁴⁰ Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome's primary proponent is Dr. Joy Degruy, whose 2005 book *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* outlines the multi-generational trauma experienced by African Americans, positing that this has led to undiagnosed and untreated post-traumatic stress disorder in enslaved Africans and their descendants.

⁴¹ The 18th century British colonial administration of St Vincent used the term Black Carib to distinguish the free, mixed-race African-Carib-Arawak population from the rest of the Amerindian people. See Hulme, pp. 242-263.

his work contributes to and subverts prevailing colonial discourses of race and gender.⁴² Brunias's painting *Free Women of Dominica Bathing in a Stream* is the titular centrepiece of the play; acting as a catalyst to the action and symbolising the stories of slavery and abolition in the drama, both past and present, literal and metaphorical.

Sir William Young, 2nd Baronet was an anti-abolitionist M.P. who opposed William Wilberforce in Parliament, conducting a tour of his properties and estates in the West Indies in order to collate information about slavery and refute abolitionist claims in the House of Commons. Young's encounters with Wilberforce, in the form of Parliamentary speeches, in addition to his other published work, thus formed part of the material research for this project. Before presenting the script of *Free Women of Dominica*, the final part of Chapter Three will briefly focus on the rhetorical formulations performed by Young and others in Parliament, interpolating the arguments of both the pro- and anti-slavery lobbies. It sets out to elucidate the role of this rhetoric in mobilisations and constructions of the English character – which was portrayed as humane, noble and forward-thinking: characteristics heralded by both sides of the abolition debate. The chapter examines the argument, which in its turn informed the action and characters of the play, that these rhetorical abstractions contributed to an enduring picture of an enlightened white Briton, rich with the moral capital bestowed by abolitionism, that continues to resonate in the political, social and cultural lives of Britons today.

⁴² See Bagneris, Mia L., *Colouring the Caribbean: Race and the art of Agostino Brunias* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018).

Chapter One

Mary Prince's Performative Voice

1.1 Introduction

The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave: Related by Herself (London, 1831), is a unique testimony. Prince, a West Indian in her late thirties, was brought to England from Antigua around 1828 by Mr and Mrs Wood, her owners of thirteen years. She had apparently persuaded them to allow her to accompany them to London, believing that the climate would help her chronic rheumatism. Mary Prince may have known that slaves were largely considered free on British soil, or she may have discovered this on arrival; whichever is the case she subsequently sought support from the Anti-Slavery Society, having left the Woods' house. The Society secretary Thomas Pringle, a Scottish poet and campaigner, offered her a position as a domestic in his household, as well as conducting a campaign on her behalf, submitting a petition to parliament in 1829. It was decided that Prince should dictate her autobiography to the lodger Susanna Strickland, an aspiring writer from a literary Suffolk family, and that Pringle would edit the work. A narrative such as this had never been attempted by a woman. *The History of Mary Prince* was to serve as effective propaganda for the Anti-Slavery Society and the emancipationist cause; on its publication it also sparked controversy and led to two court cases.¹

An exploration of this singular writing scene alongside a close reading of Prince's *History* provokes a number of immediate questions. To what extent was Prince's voice mediated by Strickland, and her story shaped by Pringle and the abolitionists? How was it possible to authenticate Prince's experiences and stimulate public sympathy, without injuring the moral sensibilities of the (often female) reader? How did the necessary collaboration between two such different women work to reproduce hierarchies of power or challenge those hierarchies? Authors of African descent who began publishing imaginative literature in English in the late eighteenth century, as foundational scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. explains, had to confront 'a collective and racist text of themselves which Europeans had invented.'² He asserts that this phenomenon helps us understand why much Anglo-African writing, 'whether Phillis Wheatley's elegies, or Olaudah Equiano's autobiography, [...] directly addressed European fictions of the African in an attempt to voice or speak the African into existence in Western letters.'³ He continues: 'When the African walked into the court of Western Letters, she or he was judged in advance by a fixed racist subtext, or pre-text, which the African was forced to confront,

¹ See Pringle's Supplement for details of the letters, articles and testimonies which were provoked by the publication of the narrative. In Salih, *The History*, p. 39. For details of the court cases see Appendices 5 and 6 in Ferguson, *The History*, pp. 136-149.

² Henry Louis Gates, Jr., 'Talking that Talk', in *"Race", Writing, and Difference*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 403.

³ Gates, *"Race", Writing, and Difference*, p. 403.

confirm or reject.’⁴ How did Prince confront, confirm and/or reject, even pre-empt, judgement? How did she address such ‘European fictions’? How does her text enact strategies such as mimicry, encoding, with-holding and the use of piety and duplicity? How far was the ex-slave able to capitalise on her awareness of her audience to control her degree of disclosure? This chapter will look at these questions of authenticity, identity and representation, specifically through the lens of Prince’s performativity. This post-colonial reading will draw attention to the connections between textual constructions and strategies and the challenge to imperialist thought and world-building exercises. It explores why and in what ways Mary Prince chose, or was obliged, to foreground and perform the self: that is, her story and her subjectivity. How did her presentation of herself embody the post-colonial critic Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of mimicry as ‘at once, resemblance and menace,’ in the sense of creating authority and autonomy for herself through her imitation of Metropolitan manners and customs?⁵

The first part of this chapter will establish the discursive background to Prince’s attempts to establish her subjectivity, prove her humanity and produce a degree of authority, through the use of life-writing. The difficulty for the colonial, subaltern, female subject to be heard through autobiography is addressed by Gillian Whitlock in her study *The Intimate Empire*. She notes that: ‘autobiography is produced in moments and spaces in which the subject is driven to grasp their positioning and subjectivity.’⁶ However, to write as a freed slave ‘has always been a matter of negotiation, a balancing act, a process of inventing the self in relation to others.’⁷ This is the backdrop against which we must evaluate Thomas Pringle’s editorial interventions in the text. Much of the imagery and language of *The History of Mary Prince* is consistent with, and arguably deploys effectively the contemporary literary and social context of the discourse of sensibility, with its characteristic appeal to a female audience. According to Brycchan Carey, academic and writer on the cultures of slavery and abolition, sentimental rhetoric demonstrates ‘a belief in the power of sympathy to raise awareness of suffering, to change an audience’s view of that suffering, and to direct their opposition to it.’⁸ Pringle instrumentalised this discourse in order to cohere support in the narrative’s largely female readership.

However, with its unique, profound and individuated story-telling, the *History* avoids conforming to many of the formal characteristics of the Romance narratives prevalent at the time. Gates establishes that while it is noteworthy for being the first woman’s story, this text also altered fundamentally the genre of the slave narrative. ‘Whereas black women are the objects of narration in the tales written by black men’, he argues, ‘Prince’s slim but compelling story celebrates their self transformation into subjects, subjects defined by those who have gained a voice.’⁹ As Whitlock concludes, Mary Prince achieves the projection of the self ‘through complex negotiations, manoeuvres and display,’ proving

⁴ Ibid., p. 403.

⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 86.

⁶ Gillian Whitlock, *The Intimate Empire: Reading Women’s Autobiography* (London: Cassell, 2000), p. 6.

⁷ Ibid., p. 7.

⁸ Brycchan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment, and Slavery, 1760-1807* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), p. 2.

⁹ Gates, *Classic Slave Narratives*, p. 10.

that ‘the shifting self is not the prerogative of the post-modern metropolitan subject alone.’¹⁰ The second section of this chapter will examine some of these negotiations, manoeuvres and displays in terms of the linguistic stratagems present in the narrative, which I will argue contribute to a process of self-fashioning, largely through performative speech acts.

The third section of the chapter will examine the text’s uses of the discourse of Christianity. The story of Prince’s conversion is prominent in the *History*, revealing how dissenting Protestantism furnished Prince with both a means of self-expression and a lexicon of imagery that enabled the acknowledgement, albeit limited, of her subjectivity. However, while Prince appears sincere, her narrative, in the words of Sandra Pouchet Paquet, also ‘reveals an acute awareness of the contradictory elements of liberation and containment framed by church teaching.’¹¹ This section will investigate whether Prince succeeds in utilising those contradictions in order to assert her subjectivity, however limited she is by the necessity to ‘perform’ the ‘version’ of Christianity inscribed by her abolitionist benefactors.

The formerly enslaved West Indian’s resistance to narratives of dominance and colonisation through various means are the subject of the fourth part of Chapter One. Her competency in domestic matters, her manipulation of the power relations between herself and her ‘owners’ and her conscious citing of a racially-based notion of community are just three of the practical and epistemological methodologies that Prince implements in opposition to hegemonic narratives, in both personal and political ways. This section interprets the implementation of these strategies of resistance through Prince’s performative speech acts, and the dramatization of her life story. Another means by which this resistance is expressed is through Prince’s deployment of her body, using sentimental rhetoric to inspire empathy and invoke a spirit of sympathetic witness in the reader / spectator. The concluding part of this chapter explores the performative positioning of the physical person, asking whether Prince is able to exert a degree of control over the uses to which her body is put. In a narrative sense, the former enslaved woman uses her body as the embodiment of her voice – it is both a script which maps her suffering, and the performative witness to that suffering. In the absence of explicit references to sexual abuse, which could not be included due to the exigencies of moral propriety, Prince focuses on the workings of affect and the sentimental representation of bodily suffering to make her case, relying on fleeting, volatile registers of embodied subjectivity. She instrumentalises her body in a variety of ways. Medical literature scholar Barbara Baumgartner argues that Prince is able to deploy the suffering body to control the terms of her exploitation, contending that at times Prince superintends access to her body and her labour by others.¹² The chapter will conclude with a discussion of Baumgartner’s assertion that Prince was able thus to assert ‘her rights as a full and complete human being’,¹³ asking whether this social and political

¹⁰ Whitlock, *The Intimate Empire*, p. 5.

¹¹ Paquet, p. 31.

¹² Barbara Baumgartner, ‘The Body as Evidence: Resistance, Collaboration, and Appropriation in “The History of Mary Prince”’, *Callaloo*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Winter, 2001), 253-275 (p. 261).

¹³ *Ibid.*

subject positioning could realistically be attained in the context of dominant colonial narratives of race and gender.

Susanna Strickland declares, in one of the few surviving anecdotal references to the writing of the *History*, that she has been writing ‘Black Mary’s life from her own dictation [...] adhering to her own simple story and language without deviating to the paths of flourish or romance.’¹⁴ The unaffected style of this ‘simple story and language’ foregrounds the personal, the colloquial and the redemptive. The *History* is, first and foremost, a compelling personal story. However, before turning to a closer examination of the text, we must acknowledge the limitations of a model of subjectivity based on notions of self-autonomy in which both editor and amanuensis exercised an extensive degree of control. Any discussion of voice here must acknowledge that the ontology of the *History* does not present as an either/or dichotomy with abolitionist goals on one side and Prince’s voice on the other. Rather, as K. Merinda Simmons underscores, these two ‘mutually and simultaneously construct and complicate each other to such a degree that would not allow either to be discussed in isolation.’¹⁵ Scholar Jessica Allen, in her 2012 enquiry into Pringle’s editorial decisions, agrees that the abolitionist agenda was paramount in this writing project. As such, Pringle’s omissions, excisions and corrections represent ‘veiled assertions of power’, which ‘violate Prince’s subjectivity.’¹⁶ Allen writes: ‘The *History* is a text inevitably comprised of multiple voices, but this polyphony does not mean that those voices exist harmoniously and free from white privilege and racist assumptions.’¹⁷ She continues:

De-emphasizing the power disparity among those involved risks depoliticizing the text’s formation and thus misrepresenting it. Early-nineteenth-century racial, colonial, economic, and gender contexts inevitably affected Prince and Pringle’s relationship in ways that good intentions—and even the shared goal of abolishing slavery – simply could not overcome.¹⁸

Allen draws our attention to Thomas Pringle’s short preface to the *History*, in which he insists that Prince’s story was initially taken down fully, and afterwards ‘pruned into its present shape; retaining, as far as was practicable, Mary’s exact expressions and peculiar phraseology. No fact of importance has been omitted, and not a single circumstance or sentiment has been added.’¹⁹ These editorial assurances, as Simmons points out, amount to a ‘series of textual and sociohistorical impediments [that] demonstrates the way agency is simultaneously created and de-centered in this text.’²⁰ They must therefore be viewed in the light of multiple literary, cultural and social factors which bore down on the publication of material by colonial subjects. An editorial footnote to the last paragraph of the text

¹⁴ Letter from Strickland quoted in Ferguson, *The History*, p. 26.

¹⁵ Simmons, 77-78.

¹⁶ Jessica L. Allen, ‘Pringle’s Pruning of Prince: The History of Mary Prince and the Question of Repetition’, *Callaloo*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (2012), 509–519 (p. 515).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 509.

¹⁹ Ferguson, *The History*, p. 55.

²⁰ Simmons, 81.

already casts doubt on Pringle's ardent disclaimer. He notes: 'The whole of this paragraph especially, is given as nearly as was possible in Mary's precise words.'²¹ This use of 'especially' leaves the reader wondering how heavily the editor's pen has been wielded elsewhere. Moreover, as Ryan Hanley emphasises, this paragraph is the most overtly polemical section of the text, attacking the position that slavery could ever be beneficial to the enslaved.²² It seems, writes Hanley, that 'Pringle was keen to ensure that the passages in the *History* which most directly corroborated the claims of the Anti-Slavery Society were also seen as the most authentic and unmediated.'²³

Another example of the contested and multiple nature of the text is present in the passage that contains Prince's opprobrium, quoted previously in the main introduction, of the bystanders gathered at the auction when she was twelve years old. Prince declares:

Did one of the many bystanders [...] think of the pain that wrung the hearts of the negro woman and her young ones? No, no! They were not all bad, I dare say, but slavery hardens white people's hearts. Oh those white people have small hearts who can only feel for themselves.²⁴

The quiet, but powerfully articulate anger expressed here, according to Ryan Hanley, serves to highlight 'the contest between author and editor over precisely what Prince was supposed to represent.'²⁵ Anger threatens to 'break through the smooth sentimental mode favoured by Pringle, troubling his careful marketing of Prince as the archetypal helpless female victim of slavery.'²⁶ As if to emphasise this, as A. M. Rauwerda notes, in the curious interjection 'they were not all bad, I dare say', Prince's indignation appears to be checked by an external intervention in mid-flow, prompting her to concede that not all white people behaved in such a way. This evidence of intervention has led critics such as Rauwerda to conclude that the narrating voice does not represent Prince, and that 'the agency ascribed to her in this narrative may be more representative of the agendas of external creators of the text than of Prince herself.'²⁷

A high level of editorial intervention appears to be proven by records of a subsequent court case. Prince's 'owner' Mr. Wood sued Pringle for libel in March 1833, after the publication of the narrative. Prince was called as a witness, and relayed many details that do not appear in the *History*. These relate mostly to sexual relationships and disputes with neighbours or acquaintances. The court record states that: '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.'²⁸ Many of Prince's affairs and concerns, therefore,

²¹ Ferguson, *The History*, p. 93.

²² This paragraph is examined in more detail in 1.3.

²³ Hanley, *Beyond Slavery*, p. 80. Hanley also highlights the ironic fact that 'the result of such interventions was to undermine the 'authenticity' of the rest of the narrative by implication, foregrounding not the voice of the enslaved subject, but those of her abolitionist allies.' *Ibid.*

²⁴ Ferguson, *The History*, p. 62.

²⁵ Hanley, *Beyond Slavery*, p. 84.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Rauwerda, 398.

²⁸ Records of court case in Appendix 6, Ferguson, *The History*, pp. 147-148.

were clearly not considered, as Pringle puts it, ‘facts of importance’. What is considered important changes over time, and the fact that Prince does not mention – amongst other things – sexual liaisons, children, or slave resistance in the Caribbean may be due as much to the demands of her amanuensis, editor and intended readership as to her own wishes or self-censorship. These pressures, omissions and silences are key to understanding the circumstances which informed the writing of *The History of Mary Prince*, and this study wishes to acknowledge the importance of these contextual conditions as it moves on to a consideration of the parameters of Prince’s authorial voice and personal agency.

1.2 *The man that says that slaves be quite happy is either ignorant or a lying person*²⁹

Claiming humanity, producing authority

Much of the appeal of a slave or freedom narrative was premised upon its channelling of personal experience and claim to ‘authenticity’, which in turn relied upon an awareness of subjectivity, whilst summoning a degree of authority premised on the observations of the autobiographical ‘I’. However, as we have seen, this first-person viewpoint could also leave the slave narrative exposed to incredulity, hence the framing of Prince’s *History* with editorial and paratextual matter. Within British metropolitan society, multiple constraints were placed upon any claims by a previously enslaved female subject. How could Prince attempt to prove to her readers that she formed part of the human community? In a society where the humanity of the Black writing subject was constantly under debate, these difficulties cannot be over-emphasised. The production of authority – the scope for the narrating subject to be and to act – was wholly contingent on the historical, sociological, cultural and political conditions. The scope of egalitarianism proposed by European Enlightenment thought and the discourse of humanism was limited by its ambivalence towards subaltern subjects. As the post-colonial theorist Achille Mbembe explains, the enlightenment conceptions of reason, humanism and universalism manifested in the colonies as ‘duplicity, double-talk and a travesty of reality.’³⁰ In the unspoken racial hierarchy that underlay the concept of universalism, he emphasises, the concept of the human was defined against a sub-human other, exposing the parameters, limits and contradictions of humanism’s categories. Enslaved subjects invariably lay outside of these parameters. Early humanist philosopher David Hume’s infamous footnote to ‘Of National Characters’, from his *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary* insisted on the ‘natural’ inferiority of black people, setting them apart from other races.³¹ Prince’s *History*, in this context, is all the more remarkable, and consequently more vulnerable. Prince’s subjectivity lay

²⁹ Ferguson, *The History*, p. 94.

³⁰ Achille Mbembe, ‘What is Postcolonial Thinking? An interview with Achille Mbembe’, *Eurozine*, <http://www.eurozine.com/what-is-postcolonial-thinking>, pp. 1-2.

³¹ ‘I am apt to suspect the negroes [...] to be naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation.’ Hume quoted in Emmanuel C. Eze, ‘Hume, Race, and Human Nature’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (2000), 691–698.

right across the intersection of gender, race and class minorities, and as such she represented the lowest link in the great chain of being. That a Black, female enslaved subject should contradict, as she does so openly in the quote above, the White European male, and accuse him of ignorance and mendacity, was unthinkable within the parameters of nineteenth-century prevailing hegemonic narratives of race, class and gender.³²

The constitution of a unitary human subject has always drawn heavily on legislature, and in the Britain of the early nineteenth century, the legal position of the Black subject was still unclear. Under English law, the status of the Black body itself differed according to geography, being subject to the vagaries, hypocrisies and confusions of the colonial metropolitan legal conversation, not to mention the further distinctions between rights pertaining on settled versus conquered territories.³³ As Sara Salih explains in *Representing Mixed Race in Jamaica and England from the Abolition Era to the Present*, the legal minutiae required to uphold the slave system were ‘set down in statute.’³⁴ Being a type of non-person, a ‘thing’, or piece of property in English law, presented a set of anomalies under which Mary Prince herself laboured. Salih explains that the most glaring of these inconsistencies was that to be held ‘legally and morally responsible for an act, one must become a person in law.’³⁵ However, to acknowledge that a slave will be morally and affectively, as well as physically and psychologically affected by a regime of punishment, is also to acknowledge their humanity. As Salih points out: ‘one cannot punish a chattel.’³⁶

This anomaly was tacitly and universally accepted and manipulated by whites, West Indian Creoles of mixed race and the enslaved alike, within the complex web of relationships that made up plantation society. It is possible to view Prince’s narrative as an illustration of how she sought to exploit this contradiction in her relation to her various owners. She reminded them constantly of her humanity, as well as her ability to challenge their rules. The first time the teenage Mary rebels against punishment, she runs away from Captain Ingham, returning later with her father, who pleads for her better treatment. When the Captain retorts that Mary has been used as she deserved, she records that she ‘took courage and said I could stand the floggings no longer [...] He told me to hold my tongue and go about my work. [...] He did not, however, flog me that day.’³⁷ Here Prince signals her first victory, minor though

³² She continues: I never heard a slave say so.’ Ferguson, *The History*, p. 94.

³³ The contradictory moves required to enshrine in law the hierarchies and racial categories of the slavery system and its increasing reliance, through the eighteenth century, on these categories, helped contribute to its downfall, according to Catherine Hall in *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination 1830-1867* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), p.10. With increased ‘miscegenation’ and the appearance of an intermediate category, it became more difficult to uphold the boundaries of ‘human’ and ‘sub-human’. How to continue to insist on white racial superiority in the presence of mixed-heritage people? The alien-ness of the occupying power became more difficult to preserve due to the complex logic of sexuality and desire, which, being locked into racial thinking, was subject to slippage as the boundaries were broken.

³⁴ Sara Salih, *Representing Mixed Race in Jamaica and England from the Abolition Era to the Present*, (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 17.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Ferguson, *The History*, p. 70.

it might be. She continues to remind her subsequent owners of her humanity throughout her life, in multiple ways. She stands up to Captain Darrell after he mistreats her: ‘at last I defended myself, for I thought it was high time to do so. I then told him I would not live longer with him.’³⁸

Prince’s manifestations of subjectivity, however, are not limited to defiance and wilfulness. In subtler iterations of power, and always working within the narrow strictures of enslavement, Prince makes herself indispensable to and is trusted by her later owners, Mr and Mrs Wood, who become increasingly reliant on her, as in this example: ‘My master and mistress went from home, as they sometimes did, and left me to take care of the house and premises.’³⁹ She also chooses and marries a husband without asking their permission,⁴⁰ and manages to raise the money to buy her own freedom: ‘I had saved about 100 dollars, and hoped, with a little help, to purchase my freedom.’⁴¹ As well as these instances of rebelliousness and resistance to categorisation, Prince’s telling of her story – the act of writing the book – was in itself, a way to prove her humanity. As Salih concludes:

Telling her life story gave Prince [...] the opportunity to demonstrate that, contrary to contemporary belief, ‘Negroes’ were [...] humans who were seriously damaged by the brutal treatment they were forced to suffer at the hands of their white masters and mistresses.⁴²

When Prince left the Caribbean and arrived in Britain, she became subject to the differing positioning and rhetoric of the metropolitan and colonial judicial systems. British law, after the Mansfield ruling in the James Somerset case, was construed to mean that slave status did not transfer from colony to metropole, and that slaves, on arrival in Britain, were free, but this apprehension was both opaque and indifferently applied.⁴³ Not only did the ruling create an ideological friction – a tacit acceptance of the planter’s view that it made no sense to impose English law in the colonies – but it afforded no genuine recourse to most enslaved people, who were brought to Britain by their owners, knowing no-one. As historian Peter Fryer’s research has shown, the extent to which English law was unclear is proven by the fact that people like the Woods openly brought slaves back and forth to England. Visiting slave-holders appeared confident that short trips did not endanger their property ownership: forty-five years after Somerset, slaves such as Grace Jones were still denied British subject

³⁸ Ibid., p. 78.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 81.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 82.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 81.

⁴² Salih, *The History*, p. xvii.

⁴³ James Somerset was brought to England in 1769, ran away, was recaptured and placed on board a ship for Jamaica. Granville Sharp, the humanitarian anti-slavery lawyer, brought the case before Lord Mansfield, who, after protracted proceedings, eventually ruled that Somerset be discharged. This was not a definitive statement on the legality of slave-holding on British soil, and this misapprehension has only been augmented by subsequent mis-interpretation, such that many historians still cite the ruling as the ending of metropolitan enslavement. See Fryer, pp. 121-126. See also Chapter 7 in James Walvin, *Black and White: The Negro and English Society 1555-1945* (London: Penguin, 1973), pp. 117-129.

status and forcibly repatriated to the West Indies.⁴⁴ Moreover, recourse to the law was not a natural reflex for a enslaved person, whom the law had never served, protected or championed. As Salih observes, a criminal must accept punishment under law because it has been made in his or her favour and for his or her protection, but there was no such contract for a slave in the colonies, for whom the law represented one of the principal instruments of their oppression.⁴⁵ This makes the trust Mary Prince placed in Pringle and the Anti-Slavery Society's ability to use the force of the law to help her, look increasingly like a leap of faith. Previously, as veteran scholar of slavery James Walvin explains, many ex-slaves simply 'escaped into the black community' where poverty often awaited them.⁴⁶

Added to this precarious legal position was Prince's low societal standing as a Black female. In the 1790s, pro-slavery advocates, recognising the need to turn up the volume in the increasingly abolitionist atmosphere of the English public sphere, took pains to disparage the 'negro' character, bringing any number of accusations of savagery to bear. For the Black male in the colonies, this included raising the spectre of his ravishing of the white woman, a so-called sexual aberration that profoundly threatened colonial patriarchal hegemonic dominance. In practice, the inverse was far more common – sexual congress between white men and Black women, consensual or otherwise. As feminist scholar Cecily Jones explains, the idea that the coloured progeny of such unions might invoke their white heritage to demand a share of political and economic power was one factor that led to the enactment of the principle of *partus sequitur ventrem*, which dictated that children's legal status followed that of their mothers. This colonial law also 'secured the ability of white males of all stations to freely appropriate, exploit and abuse the sexuality of Black and coloured women with impunity.'⁴⁷ The prevalence of this exploitation and abuse in plantation society led to the Black West Indian woman herself being condemned as promiscuous and sexually predatory. Not only was she characterised as the site of diabolical intention, symbolised by the colour of her skin, but her supposed sexual promiscuity and contagious licentiousness also came to symbolise 'the moral turpitude of the white colonial male.'⁴⁸ The blame for the white man's at best incontinent philandering, at worst serial rape, was laid firmly at her door.

Contemporaneous commentators, such as the Scotswoman Janet Schaw, who travelled to the West Indies, captured this prevailing and pejorative view of Black women in her journal: 'The young black

⁴⁴ In 1822 a customs officer in Antigua seized Grace Jones on her return from a year-long visit to England with her mistress, on the grounds that she now had the status of an English subject. When the case failed, the Jamaica Royal Gazette rejoiced that few people could now claim that 'the slaves in the West Indies are not property, and property under the special guarantee of the laws of England.' The decision, said the paper, 'stamps a value and a consistency upon West India property, nearly shaken to pieces by injustice and frenzy.' See Fryer, p. 130.

⁴⁵ Salih, *Representing Mixed Race*, p. 30.

⁴⁶ Walvin, *Black and White*, p. 135.

⁴⁷ Cicely Jones, 'White Women in British Plantation Societies', Institute of Gender and Development Studies, Mona Unit, University of the West Indies, Kingston, Jamaica. <https://networks.h-net.org/node/11465/pages/127503/white-women-british-caribbean-plantation-societies-topical-guide>

⁴⁸ Ziggi Alexander in the preface to Ferguson, *The History* (1987), p. ix.

wenches lay themselves out for white lovers, in which they are but too successful.’⁴⁹ In practice, the Black female was invariably and simultaneously the site and object of white male lust. However, as Evelyn O’Callaghan contends, in her discussion of white Creole women writers in the West Indies, the white male was not seen as ‘responsible for his treatment of the Black woman’; the latter had to shoulder the blame for tempting the white male into sexual transgression.⁵⁰ Sara Salih, the most recent of Prince’s editors, also notes the irony of the fact that due to the Black female’s supposed sexual voracity, unlimited availability and desirability, if the white man desisted from having sex with her, there must be something wrong with him. Thus, ‘in this collective narrative, white male virility and fertility would seem to be at stake.’⁵¹

In the hierarchies of Prince’s time, the categories of ‘slave’, ‘female’ and ‘black’ met at an intersection where multiple legal, cultural and social pressures bore down negatively on her social subjectivity. Being both a woman and enslaved may even have been equally or more salient than being Black.⁵² In *Civilising Subjects*, Catherine Hall’s study of the interaction between colony and metropole in the nineteenth century, she reminds us that empire was a time when anatomies of difference were continually being elaborated and re-calibrated. Categories were discursive; their meanings were ‘historically and culturally contingent.’⁵³ What seems evident is that however these multiple discourses intersected to impact on Mary Prince, she nonetheless contrived to find ways to produce authority and authenticate her message. As Jessica Allen emphasises, highlighting these important contingencies does not lead irreducibly to the conclusion that Prince can be characterised as merely a victim of Pringle’s editorial decisions, whereby her voice has been entirely stripped from the narrative. Allen writes: ‘Many of Prince’s authorial decisions do emerge in the text, and as many have argued, Prince wisely found ways to encode the meanings that she could not say outright.’⁵⁴ One of those who has emphasised Prince’s use of narrative techniques to build her authorial voice is Paquet, who asserts that as in any well-told story, Prince ‘gives direct speech to her characters to highlight a conflict, to give depth and

⁴⁹ Janet Schaw, *Journal of a Lady of Quality, being the narrative of a journey from Scotland to the West Indies, North Carolina and Portugal, in the years 1774 to 1776*, ed. by Evangeline Walker Andrews and Charles McLean, (Newhaven CT: Yale University Press, 1922), p. 112.

⁵⁰ Evelyn O’Callaghan, *"A Hot Place, Belonging to Us": Women Writing the West Indies 1804–1939* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 28.

⁵¹ Salih, *Representing Mixed Race*, p. 33. The ubiquity and normalising of concubinage in the West Indian plantocracy, ranging from casual sex to long-term partnerships, was catalogued by morally outraged travellers to the region, and by the enslaved themselves in anecdotal form. The everyday nature of rape and sexual abuse, however, was definitively and meticulously recorded by Jamaican overseer and planter Thomas Thistlewood (1721-1786), whose diaries have been edited by Douglas Hall, and more recently Trevor Burnard in *Mastery, Tyranny and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and his Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World*, (London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

⁵² Sara Salih warns of the dangers of imposing present-day apprehensions of racial identity and categorisation onto the past. The contemporary drive to identify, explain or critique Mary Prince largely in terms of race can occlude the fact that class, birth and blood (and association and corruption by blood) interacted with race and gender in a variety of ways to inform narrative and discourse. Salih, *Representing Mixed Race*, p. 132.

⁵³ Hall, *Civilising Subjects*, p. 16.

⁵⁴ Allen, 517.

tone to a character, or for dramatic emphasis.’⁵⁵ Moreover, Paquet continues, the ‘dialogic structure of the narrative is closely intertwined with its performance-oriented, storytelling aspects.’⁵⁶ Prince’s spare and seemingly unambiguous prose sometimes acts to mask the more performative and strategic features of the text. It is therefore to an analysis of Prince’s ‘simple story and language’,⁵⁷ and the narrative strategies that frame her performative self, that this chapter will now turn.

1.3 *Letting the English people know the truth*⁵⁸

Linguistic stratagems and dramatizing the self

Since I have been here I have often wondered how English people can go out into the West Indies and act in such a beastly manner. [...] They come home and say, and make some good people believe, that slaves don’t want to get out of slavery. But they put a cloak about the truth. It is not so. All slaves want to be free.⁵⁹

This passage from the final paragraph of *The History of Mary Prince* exemplifies some of the key ideas and rhetorical strategies of Prince’s mode of performance. It shows an acute awareness of audience and exemplifies the West Indian’s oral communication skills, as well as capturing the emotional tenor of much of the text. It demonstrates that despite alterations by Strickland and Pringle, some elements of Mary Prince’s ‘peculiar phraseology’ remain, and those that do are unarguably evocative.⁶⁰ Her language is often visual and frequently idiomatic. Phrases with imagery such as: ‘They put a cloak about the truth’, in the extract above, show a keen awareness of the power of metaphor. In a similar, earlier example, Prince describes the house of her formidably cruel owners, the Inghams, thus: ‘The stones and the timbers were the best thing in it; they were not so hard as the hearts of the owners.’⁶¹ The singularity of the vocabulary choice; the individual consciousness evident in the conjuring and distilling of feelings and memories, are undoubtedly two of the features that make this narrative so compelling. Furthermore, the analogy of hearts and stones is no accident: the *History* is peppered with references to the heart, which Prince uses metonymically to refer to a range of emotions and behaviours, from religious feeling, duty and filial love to empathy and loyalty.

This imagery accords with a discourse of sensibility that had emerged in the first half of the eighteenth century, and reached its apotheosis in the second. In his essay ‘Moral Sense and Sensibility in Enlightenment Thought’, Alexander Cook explains that the “cult of sensibility”, as it has often been

⁵⁵ Paquet, p. 34.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Strickland’s characterisation, quoted in Ferguson, *The History*, p. 26.

⁵⁸ The last line of the narrative begins: ‘This is slavery. I tell it to let English people know the truth.’ Ibid., p. 94.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Pringle, in Ibid., p. 55.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 64.

called, was a diverse phenomenon', describing it both as a reaction against the narrow rationalism of mainstream enlightenment thought, and as a product of an emergent commercial society.⁶² 'Many have highlighted the role of sensibility in period gender politics,' he continues, 'its common association with women, and its consequent function in attempts both to validate women's contribution to society and to circumscribe the forms of that contribution.'⁶³ The picture was less ambivalent, however, in the specific context of anti-slavery activity and its intersection with the 'female sphere'.⁶⁴ As we have seen, white British women often qualified their association with abolitionism by claiming their particular suitability to intervene in matters that concerned the heart. When it came to the plight of the female slave – her ability to be a proper wife, the disruption of the Christian institution of motherhood and the violation of female modesty – the scope for women's involvement was undeniable. Moreover, the cultural context through which Mary Prince's readers, many of them female, would have perceived slavery was already well established through the literary and political productions of the abolitionists in the late eighteenth century, most famously through the poetry of Hannah More, William Cowper and others. Such productions both aestheticized stories of slavery and located them within the narrative of sensibility. Given the status and appeal of sensibility within the anti-slavery context, Prince's foregrounding of heartfelt, affective and even sentimental language may therefore be read not only as temperamental but also as the conscious deployment of a discourse that she knows will appeal to her readership.

Prince's language throughout the narrative assumes different tones, forms and registers, moving from colloquial to lyrical, sometimes intensifying to an almost choric quality. Moira Ferguson, who edited Prince's history in 1987 and 1997, notes the contrast between the 'flat understated tones' of some of the personal recollections, such as when Mary describes being over-loaded with washing by her owners the Woods, and the lively, 'terse but supple phrasing' of reported conversations and brief, domestic encounters.⁶⁵ The 'flat tones' Ferguson highlights, have the effect of transforming some of Prince's harrowing recollections into hollow recitations of personal experiences; it may be important here to consider the necessity for Prince of having to repeat her testimonial to many different people. She was subject to the incredulity of many individuals as well as forms of authority, in the shape of the Anti-Slavery Society, the Pringle household, the several churches she attempted to join, even her fellow washerwomen in East London. By contrast, encounters and altercations are reported by Prince in vivid descriptions such as this one, where Prince has just requested to buy her freedom from Mrs Wood:

⁶² Alexander Cook, 'Feeling Better: Moral Sense and Sensibility in Enlightenment Thought', in *The Discourse of Sensibility: The Knowing Body in the Enlightenment*, ed. by Henry Martyn Lloyd, (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2013), pp. 85-104 (p. 86).

⁶³ Ibid. The tensions between the various perceptions of the value of sensational psychology both to women and society are also detailed in G.J. Barker-Benfield's 1992 work, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁶⁴ This refers to the 'separate spheres' phenomenon in this period, whereby men operated in the public sphere and women in the private.

⁶⁵ Ferguson, *The History*, p. 15.

Mrs Wood was very angry – she grew quite outrageous – she called me a black devil, and asked me who had put freedom into my head. “To be free is very sweet” I said: [...] I saw her change colour, and I left the room.⁶⁶

Through the dynamic quality of reported conversations such as this, Prince vivifies and dramatizes the stories of her victories, or at least occasions when she was able to give vent to her feelings. She reports more than once having said ‘to be free is very sweet’ to Mrs Wood, as she knows this will severely provoke her. We know from Pringle’s editorial that by his standards Prince possessed ‘a somewhat violent and hasty temper, and a considerable share of natural pride and self-importance’; qualities designated by him as shortcomings, but without which it seems unlikely that Prince would have had the strength to break out of slavery.⁶⁷ The language of the above conversation, with its evocative visual detail: ‘I saw her change colour’, and subtle reversal of status: ‘and I left the room’, with its subtext *of my own accord*, gives us some idea of the interplay of control and power between Prince and her mistress. It seems Prince is perfectly aware that Mrs Wood’s hold over her will never be complete until she accepts the state of slavery.⁶⁸

At these points in the narrative, Prince’s mastery of language becomes a powerful weapon for use against her ‘owners’. In his essay ‘The Muse of History’, the acclaimed Caribbean poet Derek Walcott illustrates the significance for the enslaved of linguistic competency when he points out that in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*: ‘the speeches of Caliban are equal in their elemental power to those of his tutor. The language of the torturer mastered by the victim.’⁶⁹ Mary Prince embodies Walcott’s paradigm by her frequent use of the word beast, as in this extract: ‘I have often wondered how English people can go out into the West Indies and behave in such a beastly manner.’⁷⁰ There are also many other animal references in the text, including comparisons of the enslaved to cattle and lame horses; even this description of herself as a young girl, standing on the auction block: ‘I was soon surrounded by strange men, who examined and handled me in the same manner as a butcher would a calf or a lamb he was about to purchase.’⁷¹ Another example is: ‘How can slaves be happy when they [...] are disgraced and thought no more of than beasts?’⁷² In the discourse of chattel slavery, the comparison between the status of the enslaved negro and that of animals was frequently made.⁷³ As Trevor Burnard notes in his study

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 86.

⁶⁷ Pringle’s Supplement, in Ibid., p. 115.

⁶⁸ The battle of consciousnesses between Mary and her mistress, interpolated in terms of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, is explored in 1.5.

⁶⁹ Derek Walcott, ‘The Muse of History’ in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, 2nd edn (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), p. 330.

⁷⁰ Ferguson, *The History*, p. 93.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 62.

⁷² Ibid., p. 93.

⁷³ Such views were popularised in the seventeenth century by influential commentators such as Richard Ligon and Hans Sloane, reinforced in the eighteenth century by racist historians such as Edward Long and the philosopher David Hume, and perpetuated in the nineteenth century by the philosopher and essayist Thomas Carlyle, whose ‘Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question’ was published in 1849.

of the eighteenth-century Jamaican plantation overseer Thomas Thistlewood, ‘The English stigmatized Blacks as wild men, beasts and savages.’⁷⁴ By her repeated use of the word beast, Prince has turned this comparison on its head. This calling into question of the English character, according to Gillian Whitlock, ‘dismantles that seemingly fixed opposition between black and white, that anchor of not only racial, but also ethnic, class and gender identities.’⁷⁵

Prince validates her persuasive rhetoric by recourse to personal experience. She attests: ‘I have been a slave myself – I know what slaves feel.’⁷⁶ This has prompted Moira Ferguson to assert that far from being the ‘silenced, gazed-upon “other” denied experience and individuality in both pro- and anti-slavery texts’, Prince ‘defiantly constitutes herself through her utterance’, identifying herself ‘to the world as a thinking, feeling woman.’⁷⁷ Perhaps knowing that her subjective experience will not be sufficient to convince her readership, Prince also invokes her community of fellow slaves, both from her own intuition and from their reports: ‘I can tell by myself what other slaves feel, and by what they have told me’.⁷⁸ Paquet repeatedly calls attention to this internal dialogism, arguing that Prince’s discourse on self and slavery ‘is responsive not only to scribe and audience but to a chorus of West Indian voices.’⁷⁹ This apperceptive background enables Prince’s interiority to be ‘expressed in connectedness to the collective human community.’⁸⁰ Ifeoma Nwankwo also stresses Prince’s clear conception of group identity based on race and condition, asserting that she ‘unambiguously embraces the idea of Black and slave collectivism. [...] She speaks often of herself and her fellow slaves as a collective whose members share the same emotions, experiences and dreams.’⁸¹ Nwankwo cites Prince’s affinity with Hetty, the ‘French Black’ at Captain Ingham’s house; with Cyrus and Jack, the two boys who also live there; with ‘Old Daniel’ on Turk’s Island, and many others.⁸² Ferguson agrees, asserting that in speaking for other slaves, Mary Prince ‘dissolves bipartisan attempts to coalesce “Africans” into one undifferentiated multitude’, thus addressing Henry Louis Gates Jr’s ‘European fictions of the African’ discussed in the opening paragraphs of this chapter.

In addition to claiming to represent the enslaved community, which Prince knows may hold limited sway with readers, she reinforces her rhetoric by appealing to truth and objectivity. ‘I will say the truth to English people.’⁸³ Possibly cognisant of the perceived restrictions on her ownership of the truth, Prince therefore goes on to draw on the status conferred on her by her amanuensis, Susanna Strickland. She characterises their endeavour as ‘the history that my good friend, Miss S—, is now writing down

⁷⁴ Burnard, p.131.

⁷⁵ Whitlock, *The Intimate Empire*, p. 25.

⁷⁶ Ferguson, *The History*, p. 93.

⁷⁷ Ferguson, *Subject to Others*, p. 10.

⁷⁸ Ferguson, *The History*, p. 94.

⁷⁹ Paquet, p. 39.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁸¹ Nwankwo, p. 164.

⁸² Hetty, p. 65; Cyrus and Jack, p. 66; Old Daniel, p. 74. All in Ferguson, *The History*.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

for me.’⁸⁴ Here, the former slave allies herself with the white Englishwoman, drawing attention to this inversion of the expected relationship between herself Strickland. As if these multiple sources of authority were not enough, Prince also invokes the highest authority of all: God.

1.4 ‘He knows what is good for me better than I know myself’¹

Performing Christianity

The conversion story was a common feature of slave and freedom narratives, and the *History* is no exception. Sue Thomas writes that such texts frequently emulated the Romance story-form, so popular at the time, which is ‘suitably animated by the rhythms of redemption and vindication.’² The themes were often played out through a religious paradigm. Helen Thomas, in *Romanticism and Slave Narratives*, contends that for those who had never known freedom, ‘the language of the Bible provided a viable discourse of liberation and reform, its metaphors of salvation and freedom providing appropriate paradigms of protest, rebellion and social transformation.’³ The ascension of an enslaved person to a state of dignified subjectivity was often premised upon the enactment of Christian tropes. This enabled him or her to position him or herself as a superior moral subject to the slaver and overseer and be viewed in similar terms by the enslaved community.⁴

Embracing Christianity could also help validate claims to a hearing in the metropole. Although Christianity was often wielded as an instrument of submission or oppression in the colonies, it was also appropriated by the enslaved as a means of expression. Equally, conversion could be assimilative to colonial culture and the slavery system, or it could be oppositional, an ambivalence which was reflected in the attitude of many plantation owners towards conversion. The latter viewed it in equal measure as a tool to teach obedience but conversely as a conduit to the inculcation of dangerous ideas and a desire for education in the enslaved population. As Michael Craton notes in his 1982 study of slave resistance in the West Indies, *Testing the Chains*, many enslaved people justified their resistance and found inspiration for their struggles to be free not from the preachers, but from the doctrine itself.⁵ Many verses from the Bible can be interpreted as supportive of slavery, while others condemn it as a sin. As if mirroring this dichotomy, numerous missionaries sent to the West Indies embodied the colonial discourse, but others had the potential, as Braithwaite argues in *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica*, to exist in opposition to the white establishment, simply on the principle of their claim to

⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹ Ibid., p. 93.

² Sue Thomas, p. 2.

³ Helen Thomas, p. 167.

⁴ The eponymous protagonist of Caryl Phillips’s 1991 novel *Cambridge* exemplifies this paradigm, to such an extent that his death at the hands of his overseer signifies the moral bankruptcy of the slave-owning class. Caryl Phillips, *Cambridge* (New York: Vintage International, 1991).

⁵ Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to slavery in the British West Indies* (New York and London: Cornell U.P., 1982), p. 247.

religious freedom. ‘Because of this’, Braithwaite argues, ‘they were, by implication, on the “side” of the slaves [...] but the slaves were still slaves, still seen as stereotypes [...] as souls to be saved.’⁶

The reception of Christian discourses and texts by the enslaved was often transformed into an opportunity. As Derek Walcott observes, the subjected African could relate to the suffering of Christ. He or she ‘understood too quickly the Christian rituals of a whipped, tortured and murdered redeemer.’⁷ In addition to this, as Helen Thomas explains, many writers from the African diaspora were able to ‘find a way of re-appropriating that text which had played such a significant role in asserting the supremacy of the English language and culture.’⁸ This appropriation is portrayed by Trinidadian novelist Earl Lovelace, in his 1982 novel *The Wine of Astonishment*, which tells the story of the outlawing in 1917 of the ‘shouters’: a Spiritual Baptist church in Trinidad and Tobago which syncretised aspects of African beliefs and practices with Baptist traditions. The authorities legislated against the church, claiming that the Black working-class congregation and the prominence of the possession phenomenon were at odds with a public striving for ‘respectability, as manifested in the social and cultural mores of the white colonial power.’⁹ The ‘syncretisation of rival hermeneutic discourses’ that such practices embody, according to Helen Thomas, ‘between the West’s Christianised concept of the “holy spirit” and its divine agency, and African spiritual epistemologies’, constituted a form of cultural synthesis.¹⁰ Through what Sue Thomas calls the ‘creolization of forms of worship’, some churches ‘became loci where Africans could assert their belonging and cultural presence by making their own moral community.’¹¹ In many instances, then, the coloniser’s religion was re-interpreted and reformulated by the enslaved through their own cultural and epistemological filters. Braithwaite sums up the attitude of many towards Christianity thus: ‘The evidence of missionary diaries suggests that in general the slaves found the missionaries a convenience. They could offer them a certain prestige; protection and privileges, sometimes. But above all they could supply, with their white man’s religion, a new and another fetish.’¹²

Dissenting Protestant organisations such as the Moravians and Methodists were often present in enslaved communities such as that of Mary Prince.¹³ In the context of colonialism and slavery, where the historical conditions of possibility for the narrating subject were intensely limited, the Moravian and Methodist practice of life narrative and oral testimony – telling your story – could potentially

⁶ Braithwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica*, p. 258.

⁷ Walcott quoted in Raymond T. Smith, ‘Race, Class and Gender in the Transition to Freedom, in *The Meaning of Freedom: Economics, Politics and Culture after Slavery*, ed. by Frank McGlynn and Seymour Drescher (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992), p. 280.

⁸ Helen Thomas, p. 167.

⁹ Marjorie Thorpe, writing in the introduction to Earl Lovelace, *The Wine of Astonishment* (Heinemann, 1986), p. viii. Any gathering or congregation of the enslaved was perceived as a threat, which is another reason why many planters resisted their conversion to Christianity.

¹⁰ Helen Thomas, p. 167.

¹¹ Sue Thomas, p. 3.

¹² Braithwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica*, p. 258.

¹³ Prince converted to the Methodists after hearing a preacher in the street. She later attended the Moravians, although the London branch she applied to join in 1833 refused to admit her.

become a form of self-assertion. In the West Indies, Prince frequented first the Methodists and later the Moravians; she references her conversion as a key moment in her life. She says of her first Methodist meeting: ‘They were the first prayers I ever understood’, adding that the meeting ‘had a great impression on my mind, and [...] I followed the church earnestly at every opportunity.’¹⁴ Prince may well have been encouraged to ‘perform’ her story within the context of church services and gatherings. This is borne out by her description of that first Methodist prayer meeting: ‘And then they all spoke by turns of their own griefs as sinners.’¹⁵ Thus conversion to Methodism possibly played a part in Prince’s ability to crystallise her own life experience into a coherent and compelling narrative.

Although Prince was most likely a genuine convert – Braithwaite stresses that ‘there were without doubt, many sincere Christian slaves - really converted’ – it is still possible to consider the instrumental aspects of her religious zeal.¹⁶ It not only offered her moral capital but may also have provided some key language and tropes through which to express rebellion. Prince often finds grounds for protest in religious appeals, such as asking for ‘proper time given in the week to keep us from breaking the sabbath’; whilst also couching her claims to justice in religious terms: ‘I hope they will never leave off to pray God [...] till all the poor blacks be given free.’¹⁷ She also makes use of the Biblical language of faith and submission, stating that ‘I endeavour to keep down my fretting, and to leave all to Him, for he knows what is good for me better than I know myself.’¹⁸ It is in the tone of this latter statement, however, that I believe Prince’s ‘natural pride and self-importance’ becomes discernible.¹⁹ The above observation, beginning with: ‘I endeavour to keep down my fretting’, then closes with: ‘yet I must confess, I find it a hard and heavy task to do so.’ The style is peremptory; the tone is begrudging. One cannot dismiss the impression that some external pressure is bearing down on Prince when she describes her feelings towards her fate.

It is possible that the paternalistic Anglican ideology of Prince’s abolitionist mentors in London was in some respects at odds with the Methodist or Moravian ideology she was familiar with. She refers to various religious teachers in the *History*, particularly when listing people who have helped her since arriving in London. The tone of this remark: ‘I enjoy the great privilege of being enabled to attend church three times on the Sunday’²⁰ verges on ironic, an impression reinforced by the qualifier: ‘Nor must I forget [...] the Rev Mr Mortimer’ – which reads as if Prince has been helpfully reminded to include him. Similarly, in the further declaration, ‘I trust in God I have profited by what I have heard from him’ (Mortimer), she does not appear personally convinced of this; again, there is a suggestion of exterior prompting. This is the same woman who pronounces, with terse, unqualified conviction: ‘I know what slaves feel’, and refutes the opinion – in an unequivocal repudiation of dominant colonial

¹⁴ Ferguson, *The History*, p. 82; p. 83.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 82

¹⁶ Braithwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica*, p. 258.

¹⁷ Both in Ferguson, *The History*, p. 94.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹⁹ Pringle’s assessment, *Ibid.*, p. 115.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

discourses – that enslaved people are content with their lot with the trenchant ‘I say, not so.’²¹ Some lines on, Prince’s tone is almost petulant: ‘Mr Mortimer tells me that he cannot open the eyes of my heart, that I must pray to God to change my heart, and make me know the truth and the truth will make me free.’²² A struggle is evident here: Prince will not take on trust what Mrs Pringle and Mortimer have taught her – she herself must ‘know the truth.’ She is also of the view, which she reiterates several times in her narrative, that appealing to the people of Britain’s consciences will be far more effective in setting her free than resorting to the cold comfort of the moral high-ground.²³ Can the echoes of an argument be detected here in the use of words such as ‘must’ and ‘make me’? Equally, can the guiding principles of her editors be heard in both the tone of this less determined and more ambivalent voice, and the tenor of the sentiments expressed?

It can be concluded, therefore, that Prince’s religiosity and her deployment of the discourses of Christianity benefitted her socially and personally in numerous ways, besides those of offering spiritual comfort and moral guidance. As well as facilitating the transmission of her message, religion gave her an outlet for self-expression, and a rehearsal space for performing her life story. It also furnished her with a set of images and tropes that accorded with her emotional ontology: the gospels are filled with imagery of hearts, truth and freedom – three touchstones to which Prince often returns. Religious institutions also enabled her to access education – she mentions learning to read at the church – the attainment of dignity and the acknowledgement, by both her peers and mentors, of her subjectivity.²⁴ What remains to a great extent unknowable, however, is the impact upon Prince and her narrative of the need to perform the ‘version’ of Christianity that her abolitionist friends sanctioned. Their requirements for Christian humility, the exercise of morality and sexual purity were non-negotiable. Absolute priority had to be given, in terms of the diegesis, to the redemptive nature of ‘rescue from sin’. It had to be the deity who enabled, empowered (and eventually humbled) Prince, not her own agency. The non-compatibility of these demands on her narration with Prince’s temperament and lifestyle surely required her, in order to express the resistance that was indispensable to her self-liberation, to bring all her powers of performance into play.

1.5 *‘I saw her change colour, and I left the room’*²⁵

Strategies of resistance

Mary Prince’s emphasis on the universal desire for freedom by the enslaved, as we have seen, shows the extent of her identification with a racially-based notion of community, and her rejection of

²¹ Ibid., p. 93.

²² Ibid.

²³ ‘I will say the truth to English people’; ‘I tell it to let English people know the truth’. Both in Ibid., p. 94.

²⁴ ‘The Moravian ladies [...] taught me to read in the class; and I got on very fast.’ Ibid., p. 83.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 86.

the narratives of dominance and colonisation. Statements such as: ‘Yet they come home and say [...] that slaves don’t want to get out of slavery. [...] It is not so. All slaves want to be free’,²⁶ also demonstrate a steady resistance to numerous historical and literary portrayals that characterised enslaved people as contented. The trope of the ‘happy slave’ featured in influential accounts such as Bryan Edwards’s 1801 history of the West Indies; and equally in cultural representations, from Agostino Brunias’s eighteenth century paintings to novels, plays and tales such as Maria Edgeworth’s *The Grateful Negro*.²⁷ It is partly due to Prince’s cognisance of this discourse that Henry Louis Gates describes the *History* as central to the development of the slave narrative, because Prince ‘repeatedly comments upon the differences between popular white myths or impressions about the feelings of slaves and the actual feelings of the slaves themselves.’²⁸ Prince appears to be fully apprised of the pro-slavery lobby’s argument that many colonial slaves were better off than poor working people ‘at home’.²⁹ In pro-slavery discourse, the bond that tied caring master and loyal slave together in ‘amorous bondage’ accorded with the sentimental semiotics of early nineteenth century romantic fiction. Stephen Ahern sees the idea that the enslaved could be grateful as yet another way to exclude them ‘from the liberty and independence that increasingly defined ‘Englishness’, and helped solidify the racial paradigm separating the races.’³⁰ On the other hand, the historian Michael Craton, among others, has identified the ‘appearance of contentment’ as one of the many forms of resistance available to enslaved people. Craton maintains that rebellion by the enslaved was multi-faceted and complex, sitting as it did in ‘the tangled web of interdependence’ that made up West Indian society. He asserts that it is impossible to ‘isolate a simple dichotomy of accommodation versus resistance’ in the enslaved population,³¹ contending that accommodation itself was a form of resistance, encompassing subtle manifestations such as listening, pretending, emulating, so-called laziness and slowness.³²

Chroniclers of Caribbean women’s history Barbara Bush, Verene Shepherd and Hilary Beckles all explore the gendered dimensions of these notions and forms of resistance.³³ Beckles, in his discussion

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

²⁷ Edwards’s *The History of the British West Indies* includes an account by my ancestor, Sir William Young: *A Tour through the Several Islands of Barbadoes, St. Vincent, Antigua, Tobago, and Grenada, in the years 1791, and 1792*. Young recorded in detail the physical state and monetary value of the enslaved on his estates, in order to advocate for slavery in parliament. His father, also Sir William Young, was governor of Dominica and patron to the Italian painter Brunias, whose work and legacy are explored by the historian, politician and artist Lennox Honychurch, at <http://www.lennoxhonychurch.com/brunias.cfm>. Maria Edgeworth’s story *The Grateful Negro* can be found in Maria Edgeworth, *Popular Tales*, Vol. 3, 4th edn (London: J. Johnson and Co., 1811).

²⁸ Gates, *Classic Slave Narratives*, p. 10.

²⁹ The comparison was made frequently in parliament during abolition debates (see for example Hansard, 28 February 1805, vol 3, 656) and also by radical Tories such as Richard Oastler and William Cobbett. Oastler, the ‘Factory King’ wrote to the Leeds Mercury on 29th September 1830 that ‘the miserable inhabitants of a Yorkshire town are at this very moment living in a state of slavery more horrid than [...] that hellish system colonial slavery.’

³⁰ Ahern, p. 12.

³¹ Craton, p. 14.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 28.

³³ Barbara Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838* (Oxford: James Currey Ltd, 1990).
Women in Caribbean History, ed. by Verene A. Shepherd (Kingston: Ian Randle, 1995).

of Black women's anti-slavery activity in the West Indies, argues that female resistance must be seen as an elastic notion. He maintains, for instance, that women's use of the language of submission often bore 'the ideology of liberation', citing the 1804 example of a letter from a Barbadian enslaved woman to her London owner, after particularly repressive measures had been introduced on his estate.³⁴ Her deferential, humble language disguises the boldness of the gesture – this form of indirect protest, Beckles argues, in the context of Atlantic slavery, should be given equal weight to that of open revolt.³⁵ This is because women had to 'develop attitudes and actions that countered efforts at the moral and political legitimisation of their relationship to the system.'³⁶ They had to identify terms of endurance in order to survive. Those terms formed a spectrum that ranged from the personal to the political and bio-social: from unpredictable behaviour and absence without leave to practising abortion and poisoning both their own babies and those of the household. Barbara Bush contends that Caribbean enslaved women also manipulated their fertility in order to decrease their childbearing potential, and rob their 'owners' of their investment in human capital.

To what extent can Prince's actions be assessed according to these criteria? Over the course of her enslavement, she reports that she had several 'owners', which implies that she might have been altering her behaviour according to her apprehension of her situation – possibly making herself either indispensable or intolerable, depending on her desired outcome.³⁷ The absence of references to children in the text may suggest that Prince practised bio-social resistance.³⁸ Her descriptions of her business dealings show that she used all her resourcefulness to make money to gain independence.³⁹ She demonstrates a strong awareness of her existential state, and rarely desists from striving against it. This consciousness begins around the age of twelve. Before that time, Prince writes that she was 'too young to understand rightly my position as a slave', but this 'happy state was not to last long.'⁴⁰ The passage from ignorance to knowledge also heralds an increasing awareness of the roles of victim and perpetrator, and for Prince it marks the beginning of a dynamic of rebellion against her condition of enslavement that only continues to grow. By the time she is sold at the auction block, she is already acutely aware of the extreme violation of her person that this represents. She writes: 'I was soon surrounded by strange

³⁴ Beckles, p. 156.

³⁵ 'My honoured master, I hope you will pardon the liberty your slave has taken in addressing you on a subject which I hope will not give you the least displeasure or offence.' Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 156.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

³⁷ This theory is entertained by Moira Ferguson, who questions Prince's selling by Mr Darrell, when she was 'still a young, fit, industrious worker', positing that it could be due to 'a maintained posture of camouflaged intransigence' on the part of Prince. Ferguson, *The History*, p. 6.

³⁸ This could also suggest that physical abuse prevented Prince from having children.

³⁹ 'Sometimes I bought a hog cheap on board ship, and sold it for double the money on shore.' *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 57; p. 59. The transition from innocence into awareness is a common feature of slave narratives. Harriet Jacobs opens her text with: 'I was born a slave, but I never knew it until six years of happy childhood had passed away.' Jacobs, p. 8. The American Frederick Douglass characterises the dawning of consciousness metaphorically, as: 'The blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass.' Douglass, p.51. Equally, the narrator of Jamaican novelist Marlon James's novel *The Book of Night Women* refers to children reaching the age when 'the nigger become black.' Marlon James, *The Book of Night Women* (London: Oneworld, 2014), p. 6.

men, who [...] handled me in the same manner that a butcher would a calf [...] and who talked about my shape and size in like words.⁴¹ She soon runs away from Captain Ingham, the man who buys her, telling him that she ‘could stand the floggings no longer.’⁴²

This is followed by numerous instances of defiance, open as well as hidden. Later in life, after many years of hard labour in the Turks and Caicos Islands, on her return to Bermuda Prince defies her master, telling him; ‘Sir, this is not Turk’s Island.’⁴³ She also states that after one flogging ‘I finally defended myself, for I thought it was high time to do so.’⁴⁴ This rebellion, according to scholar Lean’tin L. Bracks, in *Writings on Black Women of the Diaspora*, suggests an element of political manoeuvring on Prince’s part. Bracks writes: ‘While some forms of covert resistance among slaves consisted of stealing, dissembling, and arson, Mary moves beyond those responses to a more overt and politically aggressive stance. She progresses swiftly to a position of confrontation.’⁴⁵ After the act of insubordination mentioned above, Prince is hired out to another household, which she may have considered a victory. By the time she enters the Woods’ service, thirteen years before coming to London, Prince appears to have formulated a survival strategy. She exercises a kind of performative submission, behind which she continues to express defiance and seize agency in multiple ways – buying and selling on her own behalf, taking white or ‘coloured’ lovers, not asking permission before joining a church, or even getting married.

Prince’s methodology also entails making herself indispensable to her owners. She performs excellently the role of housekeeper. We know that she is trusted with the keys when the Woods go away. This enables her to make demands of her own and gives her autonomy, which she uses to make extra money. ‘I had a good deal of time to myself, and I made the most of it. I took in washing, and sold coffee and yams [...] I did not sit idling during the absence of my owners.’⁴⁶ This competency in domestic affairs enables Prince to take some degree of control over the household. She knows that the Woods need her, and that much of Mrs Wood’s power and privilege is embodied in her enslavement. She has construed that this may be the reason Mrs Wood does not wish to sell her. ‘She sold five slaves whilst I was with her,’ reports Prince, ‘but though she was always finding fault with me, she would not part with me.’⁴⁷ This awareness of her own value could be what emboldens Prince repeatedly to attempt to purchase her freedom, declaring that ‘to be free is very sweet.’⁴⁸ This is consistently denied, and the concept of freedom emerges as the main bargaining chip in the developing power struggle which begins to flourish between Prince and the Woods. Once, they send her out with a note to ‘look for an owner’,

⁴¹ Ferguson, *The History*, p. 62.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁴⁵ Bracks, p. 36.

⁴⁶ Ferguson, *The History*, p. 81.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

then refuse to sell her when someone comes forward.⁴⁹ This manipulative game only becomes more intense on arrival in London. All three of them must have been aware of the generally understood legal position of enslaved people on British soil, but Prince is a stranger in London, and does not ‘know one door in the street from another’, a fact the Woods use against her.⁵⁰ When Mr Wood threatens to put Mary on a brig back to Antigua, she announces that she will willingly go back if she can buy her freedom. He replies that ‘he would never sell my freedom – if I wished to be free, I was free in England, and I might go and try what freedom would do for me, and be d--d.’⁵¹ Passages such as this suggest that Prince and the Woods are locked in a permanent struggle for recognition and assertion that continues right up to the moment she finally walks out of their house.

Edlie Wong, in her recent work on freedom narratives, characterises Prince’s reactions and behaviour as ‘part of a much longer pattern of resistance that began in Antigua; throughout the narrative, she draws on the logic of mastery to undermine Wood’s proprietary will.’⁵² Wong contends that Wood refuses to manumit Prince precisely because he identifies her wish to be free as her own wilful desire. Prince, meanwhile, employs what Wong names as a tactic of ‘compliant non-compliance’, through which she ‘consistently undermines white peoples’ laws, invested in men such as Wood.’⁵³ This culminates in the enslaved woman taking the Woods’ threats seriously, and departing the house. In an evocative piece of story-telling, Prince describes how this unfolds.

I told her I was too ill to wash such heavy things that day. She said, she supposed I thought myself a free woman, but I was not, and if I did not do it directly I should be instantly turned out of doors. I stood for a long time before I could answer, for I did not know well what to do. I knew that I was free in England, but I did not know where to go, or how to get my living.⁵⁴

Prince then takes courage and resolves to leave, trusting to ‘Providence.’⁵⁵ When Mrs Wood hears of this, she reacts as follows:

Mrs Wood was very much hurt and frightened when she found I was determined to go that day. She said, “If she goes the people will rob her, and then turn her adrift.” She did not say this to me, but she said it loud enough for me to hear; that it might induce me not to go.⁵⁶

Thus, we see in her reporting that Prince is fully aware of the paternalistic, manipulative moves of Mrs Wood. O’Callaghan notes that the enslaved woman was indispensable to the white woman’s ontological position because the latter ‘spent all her time and effort in managing’ the former.⁵⁷

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 81.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 88.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Wong, p. 52.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 53.

⁵⁴ Ferguson, *The History*, p. 88.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 89.

⁵⁷ O’Callaghan, p. 42.

According to Hegel's much-cited treatment of the master-slave dialectic, Prince and Mrs Wood's relations can be characterised as oppositional forces, where the two women's consciousnesses are held in a constant dynamic, each defining itself in terms of the other. Therefore, as Hegel explains in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Mrs Wood is 'not certain of existence-for-self as the truth; rather, [her] truth is the inessential consciousness and the inessential action of the latter [the slave]'⁵⁸ This mutual dependence not only means that Prince, ironically, shares in her mistresses' power, but that her mistress needs Prince to legitimate her own comparative privilege. On the occasion described above, Prince definitively leaves the house, despite Mrs Wood being 'much hurt and frightened'. In a signal and performative speech act, she assembles the domestics of the household, along with the man carrying her trunk, and asks them to witness her departure, though she has 'done no wrong at all to my owners.'⁵⁹

This dramatic flare, coupled with a show of strength, is reflected in the editorial, where Pringle juxtaposes character witnesses for Mary Prince with hostile newspaper articles and the Woods' and their supporters' fulminating criticisms. In these contradictory iterations of Prince's character and attitude, we can perceive a more complex personality than that which the narrative has allowed. Pringle's character descriptions, as Simmons emphasises, are always anxious to foreground qualities congruent with the cultural context. What is most important to him, states Simmons, 'is a portrayal of Mary Prince as a "lady" that contrasts with the depiction that John Wood gives of her as a licentious, promiscuous miscreant.'⁶⁰ Thus his admission that her temper is 'somewhat violent and hasty', and his observation of her well-developed 'natural pride and self-importance'⁶¹ stand out as a meaningful concession to negativity. In addition, the statement: 'She [...] feels deep, though unobtrusive, gratitude for real kindness shown to her',⁶² with its telling use of the word 'unobtrusive', reveals a more nuanced personality than the unambiguous picture of the morally uncompromised, Christianised subject the abolitionists were at pains to portray. Ironically, in doing so, they often occluded the very personal qualities that enabled Prince to resist some of the terms of her enslavement. Having to perform within the tight boundaries of the abolitionists' moral sensibilities seems to have necessitated the exclusion from the narrative of one of Prince's sources of agency: conducting relationships and deploying her sexuality. Any mention of sexual relations outside of marriage is unimaginable in this context, so how can the former enslaved woman begin to describe the sexual ordeals her body has been subjected to? By the same token, how can Prince articulate in her text the ways in which she has instrumentalised her body and her sexuality to ameliorate her conditions or work against her abusers?

⁵⁸ Howard Kainz, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 1994), p. 61.

⁵⁹ Ferguson, *The History*, p. 90. I examine this incident in more detail in the main introduction.

⁶⁰ Simmons, 83. 'Her moral character is very bad. [...] It would be beyond the limits of ordinary letter to detail her baseness.' Letter from Mr Wood in the Supplement, Ferguson, *The History*, p. 101.

⁶¹ From the Supplement in *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁶² *Ibid.*

1.6 'No shame for his servants, no shame for his own flesh'⁶³

The absence of sex, the presence of the body

Mary Prince frequently links God and shame together when talking about the cruel acts of slaveholders. 'They forget God and all feeling of shame.'⁶⁴ Given that, as I discussed earlier, the autobiographical attributes of autonomy, self-realisation and transcendence were rarely available to enslaved writers, Prince exchanges them here for the invocation of empathy, shame and aversion, relying on making the reader a sympathetic witness.⁶⁵ According to Moira Ferguson, Prince uses the concept of shame to encode the sexual details she cannot describe.⁶⁶ Female propriety was essential in public life, and as Ferguson stresses, women sponsored by the abolitionists 'could not be seen to be involved in any situation (even if the women were forcibly coerced) that smacked of sin and moral corruption.'⁶⁷ Whatever the origin and rationale for the absence of sexual details in the *History*, it would be perverse to infer, given what we know from parallel texts such as Thomas Thistlewood's diaries and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents*, that Prince had escaped sexual abuse.⁶⁸ Paquet, Salih, Ferguson and Olney all agree that the use of the text as propaganda for the anti-slavery movement and the demands of the mainstream audience dictated that Prince must appear morally unimpeachable.⁶⁹ This censure meant not only erasing any trace of her own sexual agency but also of the abuses done to her. Sexual connotations are nonetheless present in the text, and descriptions such as the following of Mr Darrell's bath are almost certainly encoded for sexual abuse:

He had an ugly fashion of stripping himself quite naked and ordering me to wash him in a tub of water. This was worse to me than all the licks. Sometimes when he called me to wash him I would not come, my eyes were so full of shame.⁷⁰

Ironically, as Ryan Hanley points out, decorum and propriety may have had stronger resonances for the contemporary readership than more physically violent sexual assault. Hanley writes: 'Modern readers will instantly identify Mr. D—'s coercive demand as sexual abuse, but it would not necessarily have

⁶³ Prince says this of her master, Darrell in *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁶⁵ The spectre of shame is also conjured in relation to Prince's feelings about herself, in the context of her Christian conversion: 'I felt sorry for my sins also. I cried the whole night but I was too much ashamed to speak.' *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ See 1.2 for details of Thomas Thistlewood.

⁶⁹ Paquet, p. 32. Ferguson, *The History*, p. 4. Olney, 56. Salih, *The History*, p. x. Olney writes: 'When the abolitionists invited an ex-slave to tell his story [...] in print, they had certain clear expectations, well understood by themselves and well understood by the ex-slave too, about the proper content to be observed, the proper theme to be developed, and the proper form to be followed.' This form, in the case of a woman, meant presenting as 'sexually pure'.

⁷⁰ Ferguson, *The History*, p. 77. It seems that Jamaican novelist Marlon James concurs on the implications of this scene. The female characters in his novel *The Book of Night Women*, set in 1795, are frequently forced to give sexual relief to their masters at bath-time. 'Right when me was giving him bath and him want him cocky jerk.' James, p. 318.

been parsed as such by its intended readership of middle-class women in the 1830s.’ He claims that Prince’s characterisation of this behaviour as ‘ugly’ implies an appeal to moral outrage on the grounds of decorum rather than moral repulsion at violent sexual assault.⁷¹

Prince’s next few lines are also significant: ‘I then told him I would not live longer with him, for he was a very indecent man – very spiteful and too indecent; with no shame for his servants, no shame for his own flesh.’⁷² Given that Prince was repeatedly physically punished, it is telling that she chose to put her foot down in connection with these bath-time episodes. The words indecent and shame both appear twice more in this sentence. As Harriet Jacobs repeatedly stresses, the evil influence of the institution of slavery finds its apotheosis in the corruption of the enslaved female body. ‘Slavery is terrible for men, but it is even more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, *they* have wrongs and sufferings and mortifications peculiarly their own.’⁷³ Jacobs’s detailed descriptions of the attempts to sexually corrupt her contrast with Mary Prince’s reticence on the subject:

I now entered on my fifteenth year – a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl. My master began to whisper foul words in my ear [...] I turned from him in disgust and hatred. But he was my master. [...] There is no shadow of the law to protect [the slave girl] from insult, from violence, or even from death [...] she will become prematurely knowing in evil things.⁷⁴

Moreover, Jacobs’s resistance to this corruption is one of her principal claims to asserting her humanity, self-definition and subjectivity. Simmons also emphasises that Prince’s rebuking attitude to Darrell may reflect a genuine disapproval of his behaviour, as well as the shrewd deployment of the politics of British colonial society. Simmons asserts that though Prince’s travels have made her a product of these societal influences, her ‘political and rhetorical savvy do not necessarily preclude the possibility of her actually believing her master to be morally repugnant.’⁷⁵

Mary Prince may have chosen, or been forced to define herself according to her encounters with men. Although references to sexuality in the *History* are confined to the mention of her husband, Daniel James,⁷⁶ three other men, all of whom Prince solicits to help buy her freedom, feature in the story prior to her marriage: Adam White, a free Black cooper, Mr. Burchell, and a ‘gentleman’ called Captain Abbot.⁷⁷ The nature of her relations with the first two is not known, but when Prince was called as a witness in the lawsuit Wood brought against Thomas Pringle in March 1833, she revealed that she had lived seven years with Captain Abbot.⁷⁸ She also mentioned a freeman called Oyskman, who ‘was the first man who came to court her’ in Antigua. She ‘lived with him for some time, but afterwards

⁷¹ Hanley, *Beyond Slavery*, p. 92.

⁷² Ferguson, *The History*, p. 78.

⁷³ Jacobs, p. 66.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁷⁵ Simmons, 85-86.

⁷⁶ The story of their meeting and marriage is brief: Ferguson, *The History*, pp. 84-85.

⁷⁷ All three appear in *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁷⁸ Wood vs Pringle, Appendix 6, in *Ibid.*, p. 147.

discharged him.⁷⁹ The content of these revelations as a witness in court are notably at variance with Prince's restrained disclosures in the *History*. She recounts, amid laughter, that: '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).'⁸⁰

Relationships with free and white men could occasionally lead to increased power and status for enslaved women, and as Hilary Beckles's research indicates, such relationships were duplicated across the Caribbean.⁸¹ Simmons concurs that Mary Prince's 'strategic use of sexuality, both in her disruptions of masters' power through relationships with white men and in her deliberate silences to retain her feminine integrity, reveals her contradictory status between liberation and repression.'⁸² The notion that the exclusion of Prince's relations with men in the *History* may have curtailed Prince's ability to portray herself as an empowered individual is countered to some extent by A. M. Rauwerda, who argues that claims that Prince's relations with 'a white lover' offer her 'sexual self-expression and a form of control over her circumstances' are overstated.⁸³ These sorts of relations, writes Rauwerda, are not as indicative of Prince's agency as is sometimes assumed.

If one argues that Prince was engaging in sexual relations with Wood in order to persuade him to bring her to England, one can equally argue that because of some attachment on his part he refused to manumit her once she was there. In the end, Prince has no agency with which to secure her manumission, possibly even as a result of her sexual relations. Wood does not release her.⁸⁴

Prince's sexual agency, therefore, can be apprehended to have operated across a spectrum of contradictory and confirmatory impulses and outcomes, both liberational and oppressive. Her additional silence on the subject of children could point to further censorship, due to abolitionist moral concerns over illegitimacy or miscegenation. Moira Ferguson emphasises the rarity of this particular omission and speculates that physical abuse may have led to her sterilisation.⁸⁵ Barbara Bush, as we have seen, posits that refusing to 'breed' was 'a form of hidden, individual protest against the system, over which

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 148.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 147. Prince also makes clear that though she had told all this to Strickland, none of it had appeared in the published narrative. Ibid., p. 148.

⁸¹ For an account of the story of Old Doll's family, who lived on the Newton's Estate in Barbados, see Beckles, pp. 130-131. Three successive female generations of this family acquired special status by marriage and concubinage to white men, consolidating a power base in the household that made them sometimes appear 'more free than slave'.

⁸² Simmons, 89. The 'sexualising' of Prince's contradictory status is also revealed in the accusations of pro-slavery opponents of Pringle, who openly accused Prince of being a prostitute. 'The Anti-Slavery Society see nothing but purity in a prostitute.' Article in the Bermuda Sampler, quoted in Ferguson, *The History*, p. 47.

⁸³ Rauwerda, 402.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ferguson, *The History*, p. 14.

slave masters had even less control than more overt forms of collective resistance.⁸⁶ Literature and medicine scholar Barbara Baumgartner, in her article exploring the body as a site of resistance, collaboration and appropriation in *The History of Mary Prince*, maintains that although there is no concrete evidence that Prince was involved in this type of protest, given the centrality of her body to her defiance the ‘failure to bear children and the absence of any articulation of desire to do so strongly suggest another sign of her refusal to support the system of slavery whenever possible.’⁸⁷

The ‘centrality of the body’ referred to by Baumgartner, stands in contrast to the absence of sexuality in the text. Frequent allusions to the body are prominent in most slave narratives, and the *History* is no exception. It returns repeatedly to Prince’s body, both the description of punishment and the impact of abuse on her health, as in this early example: ‘I was in a dreadful state – my body all blood and bruises, and I could not help moaning piteously.’⁸⁸ And later: ‘I soon fell ill of the rheumatism, and grew so very lame that I was forced to walk with a stick. I got the St Anthony’s fire, also, in my left leg, and became quite a cripple.’⁸⁹ The suffering body was one of the predominant tropes of sentimental representation, the features of which would have already been familiar to Prince’s readers.⁹⁰ The wealth of detail here, however, leads Sue Thomas to argue that ‘Prince’s sickly body becomes a metonym for the unethical truths of slavery.’⁹¹ Baumgartner, on the other hand, contends that Prince’s struggles to take control of her body and her pain at times present her with opportunities for agency – the principal one being the writing of the narrative itself.

While the slavocracy is able to write on [Prince’s] body and silence her for years by controlling the meanings associated with her person, [...] with the publication of her narrative, she indicts a system that assaulted her body with impunity and asserts her rights as a full and complete human being.⁹²

Thus the publication of the *History* becomes the embodiment of Prince’s answer to the physical challenges of enslavement.

Baumgartner then extends her argument to encompass how Prince deploys her suffering body at different stages in her life. She suggests that early on, and also during her time on Turk’s island, sheer volume of work and devastating physical hardship mean Prince can only struggle to survive; but later,

⁸⁶ Bush, p. 150. See also Beckles, p. 159. Despite the introduction of pro-natalist policies and incentives to the islands in the early nineteenth century, there is evidence of continuing exertion of bio-social control by enslaved women.

⁸⁷ Baumgartner, 260.

⁸⁸ Ferguson, *The History*, p. 69.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁹⁰ Mary A. Waters, writing on sympathy in abolitionist poetry, maintains that scholars have long recognised sensibility as a discourse grounded in the body. ‘The defenceless objects of sympathy [...] manifest their injuries and persecuted state bodily through tears, fainting [...] and collapse, but the witness [...] was expected to respond in a similar language of the body – with tears, agitations, thrills, vibrations.’ Mary A. Waters, ‘Sympathy, Nerve Physiology and National Degeneration in Anna Laetitia Barbauld’s Epistle to William Wilberforce’ in Ahern, p. 90.

⁹¹ Sue Thomas, p. 151.

⁹² Baumgartner, 261.

her body provides her ‘with the means of creating a new order of experience, a new subject position from which she can speak and, in some sense, transcend the brutality that had previously shaped and defined her.’⁹³ This is possible, argues Baumgartner, because once Prince reaches a place of relative safety, i.e. the service of the Woods, she begins to refuse to complete assigned tasks due to her poor physical condition. We can read this as a deliberate tactic if we look at the alternate descriptions Prince provides of her physical state during the period she lives with the Woods, before coming to Britain. At one point she falls ill and is confined to a verminous outhouse; at another she continues to ‘do all the work and mind the children, though still very ill with the rheumatism.’ Another time she falls sick and ‘could not keep on with my work.’⁹⁴ However, these anecdotes are interspersed with descriptions of the ingenious ways in which Prince works to make her own money, including taking in washing and selling goods. ‘I did not sit idling’, she declares.⁹⁵ This is not to suggest that Prince was feigning illness, but that the emphasis she placed on her debilitated body and levels of pain when required to work by the Woods sometimes differed from her assessment of her ability to work for her own benefit. Baumgartner regards this as a strategy of resistance. She notes: ‘Her labour is valuable to her owners; her body is a commodity that they believe they own and control. Prince's decision to withhold her work and control her body has economic and political consequences.’⁹⁶ Accordingly, ‘Prince narratively situates her bodily illness in ways which allow her to exert some control over her situation.’⁹⁷ Baumgartner concludes that:

The slave's broken down body, which would normally be construed as a sign of slavery's power to debase, mutilate, and destroy, ironically serves as a key locus of opposition; it enables her to refuse to capitulate to further demands of servitude. Prince makes meaning and sense out of her suffering, [...] rereading the residual marks of slavery left on her body and inscribing a new and different text.⁹⁸

This denomination of the body as a text collocates with the ontology of the narrative itself, raising questions about the implementation of the body as a form of proof. As we have seen, textual evidence to support the veracity of Prince's story was supplied in abundance by Thomas Pringle. The ladies of the household, however, were mobilised to provide an altogether different form of testimonial, in the shape of a ‘viewing’ of Prince's body. No fewer than four women signed a letter attesting that:

⁹³ Ibid., 253.

⁹⁴ Ferguson, *The History*, p. 79; p. 80; p. 81.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 81.

⁹⁶ Baumgartner, 258.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 261.

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, [...] as if the flesh had been deeply cut, or lacerated with large gashes.⁹⁹

The ritualistic exhibition of her flesh as proof of her words turns Prince's body into a script, to be read in parallel to her utterance. The incontrovertible truth of her scarred flesh acts as testament to reinforce her narration's claims, and entitles her to a hearing. Whether willingly or not, Prince must make use of her body to establish a communality with her audience, since the opportunities for an enslaved Black woman to assert her subjectivity were severely limited, and few points of alliance existed between her and her public. The involvement of the reader, listener or viewer as a sympathetic spectator – making the audience witness – was a feature of the slave narrative genre that Prince had to be prepared to exploit to the full.

Barbara Baumgartner characterises the above letter from the four women as a positive affirmation of Prince's story and its meaning. In contrast to what she calls Pringle's controlling, combative and sceptical editorship, with its 'accumulation of information', the women's intercession allows 'Mary Prince's testimony, as represented in the narrative, in conjunction with her body, to speak for itself.'¹⁰⁰ Baumgartner's gendered perception of this intervention as a good exemplar of collaboration and corroboration glosses over the negative implications of this group viewing of Mary's scars as an invasive act of appropriation of the Black female body as a form of spectacle. It points up a compelling disparity between gendered forms of witness in relation to Prince and the transmission of anti-slavery ideology. A. M. Rauwerda draws attention to the ways in which this act of inspection – seeing, writing and naming Prince's body – accentuates the evacuation of Prince's personhood, or identity. She states that 'Prince's body is thus finally named, a move that makes it as contained and labelled as she is when she is named by others in the text.'¹⁰¹ The scars on Prince's back, she continues, 'and the written summary of them, serve only to create another absence, another negative behind the image of "slave woman" created by empowered individuals as they assimilate Prince to fit the needs of their cause.'¹⁰²

This chapter concludes, therefore, with a reiteration of the complexity and multi-vocal nature of *The History of Mary Prince*, confirming that a search for intentionality is fraught with uncertainties. The fact that the marks on Prince's body are not spoken of by the former enslaved woman herself is restated by both Whitlock and Simmons. Whitlock concludes that 'ultimately the inscriptions of flogging on the body of the Caribbean woman, a body made grotesque and painful by abuse, are what speak authentically to the good people of England.'¹⁰³ Simmons adds that therefore: 'Even in her authenticity here, [...] Prince is resigned to an unavoidable alterity. Her "grotesque" difference is what proves the

⁹⁹ This letter is from Margaret Pringle in response to an enquiry from the Birmingham Ladies' Society for the Relief of Negro Slaves. Appendix in Salih, *The History*, p. 64.

¹⁰⁰ Baumgartner, 261; 264.

¹⁰¹ Rauwerda, 406.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Whitlock, *The Intimate Empire*, p. 23.

veracity of her story.¹⁰⁴ Thus, in this letter from the well-meaning white ladies of the household, sent in answer to another group of equally well-meaning ladies, Prince's own voice is erased once again.

¹⁰⁴ Simmons, 86.

Chapter Two

Robert Wedderburn's theatrical voice

*'I come not to make peace. Truth is my arrow stained by Africans' blood'*¹

2.1 Introduction

‘My heart glows with revenge, and cannot forgive’²

Robert Wedderburn was born around 1762 in Jamaica, the son of an enslaved woman and a Scottish planter. He was freed at the age of three, and had a dislocated and virtually parentless upbringing, the only constant of which was his formidable enslaved grandmother, Talkee Amy.³ Amy operated a semi-autonomous business, smuggling goods and ‘higglering’ for her master.⁴ She had grown up in West Africa, and was a known obeah woman.⁵ Wedderburn lived mainly with her, and though he was never consciously enslaved, it was here that he witnessed the iniquities of the system he was later to condemn. Throughout his life he consistently emphasised his roots in enslavement, declaring on one occasion: ‘To my unfortunate origin I must attribute all my miseries and misfortunes.’⁶ Wedderburn openly called himself a descendant of an African slave,⁷ and an ‘oppressed, insulted and degraded African.’⁸ Of Roseanna, his mother, he said, ‘[she] was of a violent temper [...] – yes, and I glory in her rebellious

¹ Robert Wedderburn, *The Axe Laid to the Root*, No 4 (1817), in McCalman, *Horrors*, p. 96.

² Wedderburn, *Axe*, No.1, in *Ibid.*, p. 86.

³ Wedderburn himself claimed, and most scholars have repeated, that he was free from birth under an arrangement made with his mother. However, the records prove otherwise. Jamaica Archives, Spanish Town, 1B/11/6/9, ‘Manumission of Slave Registers’, ff. 37–8, cited in Ojo and Hunt, p. 178. Hunt suggests that Wedderburn, as a freed mixed race man, may have claimed to be born free to avoid being labelled as the lowest in the hierarchy of West Indian society. She also speculates that he may have been crediting his mother with a certain bargaining power and agency, in negotiating for his freedom during her pregnancy. *Ibid.*, p. 179.

⁴ Higglering, or huckstering, was selling or bartering goods, produce or animals, sometimes on behalf of the master or mistress, often on an enslaved person’s own behalf.

⁵ Historian Diana Paton explains that: ‘as a term, “obeah” has always referred to multiple phenomena. At the most obvious, it describes practices involving ritual attempts to manipulate a world of spiritual power.’ Obeah was illegal, linked to slave resistance and constructed by the colonial power as dangerous African superstition. Paton stresses that for these reasons it was not a term people used to describe their own practices. Diana Paton, *The Cultural Politics of Obeah: Religion, Colonialism and Modernity in the Caribbean World*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 1-3. Braithwaite describes obeah men and women thus: ‘black and /or slave preachers, doctors and obeah-men [...] were almost entirely independent of white control and contributed enormously to the physical and psychological well-being of the slave population and therefore to the health of society as a whole. [...] a good obeah man would have influence throughout the district. These obeah men (and women) received a great deal of attention from the white legislators of the island.’ Braithwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica*, p. 162.

⁶ Robert Wedderburn, *The Horrors of Slavery, exemplified in the life and history of the Rev. Robert Wedderburn*, (London: published for the author, 1824) in McCalman, *Horrors*, p. 44.

⁷ In a letter to the Home Secretary, the Rev. Chetwood Eustace reported having heard Wedderburn call himself ‘the descendant of an African slave.’ PRO HO 42/191 [Rev. Chetwood Eustace] [10th Aug. 1819] in *Ibid.*, p. 116.

⁸ ‘Respected Sir, An oppressed, insulted and degraded African, to whom but you can I dedicate the following pages, illustrative of the treatment of my poor countrymen?’ This is the dedication to William Wilberforce in Wedderburn, *Horrors*, in *Ibid.*, p. 44.

disposition, and which I have inherited from her.’⁹ Recent commentators such as Edlie Wong and Nadine Hunt have drawn attention to Wedderburn’s embrace of his matrilineal heritage, pointing to his self-depiction as the ‘offspring of an African slave’, and his fashion of citing his mother as his primary influence.¹⁰ Edlie Wong, in her recent work on enslaved freedom suits and transatlantic abolitionism, states that ‘Wedderburn [...] identifies his Jamaican slave mother, Roseanna, as the wellspring of his revolutionary fervour.’¹¹ A freeman from an early age, Robert could have chosen to fasten his imagination on his white paternal heritage. Doing so might have accorded him higher status in the strictly racialised hierarchy of West Indian society. James Wedderburn of Inveresk was a slave-dealer and owner of a substantial plantation. Yet in his 1824 publication *The Horrors of Slavery*, Wedderburn writes that he wishes to ‘shew the world that, not to my own misconduct is to be attributed all my misfortunes, but to the inhumanity of a MAN, who I am compelled to call by the name of FATHER.’¹² He reserved only bitter recriminations and excoriating insults for James Wedderburn, accusing him of lewdness and deep depravity, calling him a ‘bantam cock strutting on his own dunghill’, and ‘a perfect parish bull.’¹³ This repudiation of his paternal origins and emphasis on his roots in slavery highlights Wedderburn’s identification with the colonized over the colonizer, and illustrates his fierce embrace of the Caribbean and West African cultural worlds of his mother and grandmother.

At around the age of sixteen, although he was making a sketchy living as an itinerant millwright, Wedderburn joined the navy. He consequently landed in Britain around 1778, aged seventeen, gravitating towards London and settling in St Giles: an overcrowded warren of a slum, home to many of London’s Black poor, and populated by musicians, street performers, costermongers, beggars, thieves, prostitutes and pornographers. The young Wedderburn was already proving rebellious, according to Iain McCalman, who reports that during the Gordon riots of June 1780, Robert ‘looked on approvingly and later boasted of his friendship with one of the ringleaders. He may even have participated in the destruction and looting without being caught.’¹⁴ Wedderburn married in 1781, setting himself up as a journeyman tailor in Shoreditch.¹⁵ In 1796, like his Black literary predecessors Equiano and Cugoana, Wedderburn underwent a dramatic conversion to Christianity. Listening to a Wesleyan preacher in the street, as he describes in his first tract, a doctrinal essay entitled *Truth Self-Supported*,

⁹ From a letter to the Editor of *Bell’s Life in London*, 29th March 1824, in *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹⁰ From the handbill advertising one of Wedderburn’s chapel debates, August 1819: ‘The Offspring of an African Slave will open the Question.’ In *Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹¹ Wong, p. 34. This foregrounding of Amy and Roseanna, argues Hunt, ‘ensured that these two enslaved women were not forgotten in the historical record [...] and showed the physical, sexual and emotional abuse they faced over the course of their life in Jamaica.’ Ojo and Hunt, p. 188. Wedderburn’s later work remains unapologetic in stating these allegiances: ‘I deem it an act of justice to myself, to my children, and to the memory of my mother, to say what I am and who were the authors of my existence.’ McCalman, *Horrors*, p. 44.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Examples taken from Wedderburn’s introduction to an exchange of letters with his British half-brother, Andrew Colville, published in *Bells Life in London*, February 20th 1824. In *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁵ After his marriage he turned for help to his father, who now lived in Scotland as an absentee planter. Wedderburn Snr refused to acknowledge his mixed-race son and pregnant wife, turning them from the door. The couple had no choice but to return to London.

his mind was struck with a ‘strong conviction of the awful state he was in,’ resulting in his ‘joyful embrace of the gift of God’s grace.’¹⁶ McCalman describes this 1802 publication as ‘in some respects an orthodox example of working-class spiritual autobiography’; however, it quickly departs from conventionality, establishing an eccentric style that mixes personal anecdote with criticism of the clergy and calls for religious freedom and political reform.¹⁷

It was also during the 1790s that Wedderburn cut his political teeth, at the height of Jacobinism’s influence and cultural power, before its rapid decline at the end of the decade, due to a rigorous campaign of government repression.¹⁸ His position as a discharged Black sailor and his artisan pride as a tailor at a time of steadily declining wages contributed to his radicalisation and his adoption of revolutionary rather than reformist principles. His subsequent 1813 meeting with Thomas Spence, the radical advocate of land reform and universal rights, further cemented his belief in ultra-radicalism and Paineite republicanism. Now licensed as a Unitarian minister, on Spence’s death in 1814, Wedderburn was a principle inheritor of his legacy; thereafter, much of his preaching espoused a potent mixture of millenarian prophesy and agrarian, communitarian reform – in conjunction with calls for an end to slavery. In 1819 he opened a dissenting ‘chapel’ in Soho, where he served up a heady mixture of songs, rowdy debates and burlesque buffoonery, with riotous contributions from his sidekick, the ‘Black dwarf’, Samuel Waddington.¹⁹ It was through these performances that he gained a reputation as a formidable speaker, and soon came to the attention of the authorities. Charged with sedition in 1819, Wedderburn escaped conviction; it was his 1820 trial for blasphemy which landed him in Dorchester gaol for two years. Not only did both these trials provide the now sixty-year old preacher with a welcome platform to air his views, but the subsequent prison term earned him a visit from the ageing abolitionist William Wilberforce, as well as effectively saving him from execution for his supposed part in the Cato Street conspiracy, a revolutionary plot to assassinate the cabinet.²⁰ The incarceration took its toll, however, and though on his release from jail, the aging Wedderburn continued to attend radical meetings, his ribald preaching style and carnivalesque capers were increasingly out of step with early

¹⁶ Robert Wedderburn, *Truth Self-supported, Or A Refutation of Certain Doctrinal Errors, Generally Adopted in the Christian Church*, (London: W. Glindon, 1802) in *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁸ Michael Scrivener’s monograph of Thelwall, the radical writer and allegorist, contends that Jacobin writing transformed London life, ‘British Jacobinism expanded and reshaped the public sphere, initiated numerous literary experiments, captured the allegiance of talented intellectuals and influenced the novel and theatre.’ Michael Scrivener, *Seditious Allegories: John Thelwall and Jacobin Writing*, (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), p. 1.

¹⁹ Waddington was a white shoemaker who became a radical in response to increasing unemployment and poverty among the artisan class. His tiny stature and wicked humour earned him the name the ‘black dwarf’. There may also be a link here to Thomas Wooler’s radical satirical weekly periodical of the same name.

²⁰ Wedderburn’s 1824 *The Horrors of Slavery* may have owed its autobiographical theme to this jail visit from Wilberforce. Its dedication describes the evangelical veteran’s visit to the prison and dedicates the tract to him, inviting him to use its contents in ‘any motion in parliament’. But if Wilberforce hoped for a toning down of Wedderburn’s anti-authoritarian views, he must have been disappointed. *Horrors* consists mainly of a blistering attack on Wedderburn’s father and an exposé of the ongoing physical and sexual abuses of colonial slavery. McCalman, *Horrors*, p. 44.

Victorian values, and in 1830 he was convicted of ‘keeping a disorderly house’, most likely a brothel, and imprisoned again, this time for twelve months. He died in late 1834.

Wedderburn’s circle has been described by McCalman as the ‘radical underworld’ of London.²¹ Certainly, he consistently rejected the categories of ‘civilisation’ and scorned the idea of acquiring literacy. In the first part of this chapter I will explore Wedderburn’s preference for oral performance, examining his theatrical voice with specific reference to this rejection of literacy, and how he deployed orality to further his political and social aims. Why did Wedderburn, in full knowledge of the over-arching power of literate discourse, chose to rely so heavily on the spoken voice? How did this preference for the oral mode contribute to and construct his religious and political articulations? The second part of the chapter will examine how Wedderburn exploited religious non-conformist rhetoric to further the transmission of his heterodox social and political messages.

Wedderburn’s flagrant disrespect for the establishment and open fomenting of revolution was often expressed through an insistence upon the links between exploited peoples on both sides of the Atlantic. His custom of correlating Atlantic chattel slavery with British wage slavery has prompted scholars such as Paul Gilroy and Alan Rice to hail him as a key exponent of working-class discourses of the Black Atlantic.²² This ability to focus on the inter-relatedness of power operations also manifests in Wedderburn’s apparent embrace of a plurality of influences and epistemological belief systems. McCalman notes that despite Wedderburn’s conversion to Christianity in 1796, there is no evidence that ‘the experience caused any rupture of his West Indian cultural heritage.’²³ The American scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr’s ground-breaking book *The Signifying Monkey* traces the influence of African traditions on African-American speech and discourse, delineating the impact of the trickster figure, who represents the unity of the opposing forces of Esu and his friend the monkey.²⁴ Wedderburn’s oral and written work exhibits many of the characteristics Gates attributes to the trickster, including satire, parody, irony, magic, indeterminacy, open-endedness and ambiguity. What begins to emerge, therefore, is evidence of a multiplicity of cultural influences that bore down on the formation of Wedderburn’s

²¹ Peter Linebaugh, in his 1993 investigation into Wedderburn’s literacy, reflects that this underground metaphor gives the impression that the ultra-radicals had little impact on British politics. He prefers the use of a contemporary metaphor, coined by the poet Coleridge, characterising subterranean lower-class discontent as moving and mining in ‘the underground chambers, with an activity the more dangerous because the less noisy.’ Peter Linebaugh, ‘A little Jubilee? The literacy of Robert Wedderburn in 1817’, in *Protest and Survival, The Historical Experience: Essays for E P Thompson*, ed. by John Rule and Robert Malcolmson (London: The Merlin Press, 1993), p. 217.

²² In reference to Wedderburn and Equiano, Gilroy underlines the importance of ‘charting the long-neglected involvement of black slaves and their descendants in the radical history of our country in general and its working-class movements in particular.’ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 12. This historiography questions the argument that abolitionist and working-class discourses were at odds during this period. See 2.3 for the elements of this discussion.

²³ McCalman, *Horrors*, p. 9. From a religious point of view, as Sylvia Wynter emphasises, Christianity was not incompatible with African religions, which have ‘what has been called a “monotheistic superstructure”, that is to say a basic belief in one absolute creator, who is over all. Yet under him are many lesser gods. Because of this the Africans were able to accept Christianity.’ They accorded Christ and the trinity a powerful place in their world-view, without necessarily supplanting previously-held beliefs. Wynter, 36.

²⁴ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, p. 21.

voice. In the third part of this chapter I will build on the work of Rice, Gates, Wynter, Braithwaite and Linebaugh to explore how Wedderburn syncretised these multiple narratives to inform his theatrical self-fashioning, and ask to what extent he ‘creolized’ Caribbean and metropolitan political, epistemological and hermeneutic discourses. Did the lateral, creolizing models of encounter and exchange act as a template for Wedderburn’s own embodiment of disparate narratives? Did he critically appropriate social and religious elements of the cultures he interacted with, incorporating them into his theatrical and performative modalities?

Wedderburn’s chosen modes and registers of address relied in large part on satirical, burlesque, impious laughter, taking his audience with him on an unruly, subversive journey of religious and political send-up. This ‘corrective’ humour could be said to draw on the profane logic of the carnivalesque, as displayed in the rituals of Jamaican Jonkonnu, which involved masks, costumes and music, and was performed by the enslaved for all sectors of the population, including the planter class. Often understood as a transplanted African performance, Jonkonnu also provided a pretext for barely controlled revelries hinting at threatening reversals of slavery’s power structures.²⁵ This application of the popular corrective of laughter to the narrow-minded seriousness of spiritual pretence becomes relevant to a consideration of Wedderburn’s verbal productions, given the significance of carnivalesque moments in Caribbean cultures, which have sanctioned temporary inversions and parodies of authority figures and embodied norms. Wedderburn’s unstable, anarchic, blasphemous and essentially dialogic preaching style embodies many carnivalesque characteristics. Eric Pencek, in his 2015 essay ‘Intolerable Anonymity: Robert Wedderburn and the Discourse of Ultra-Radicalism’, argues that his voice is ‘frequently a parodic voice, in which the outrageous, comic, or carnivalesque holds particular sway.’²⁶ The third and concluding part of this chapter briefly assesses the effect of this carnivalesque voice, asking how it contributed to Wedderburn’s willingness to subvert prevailing religious, cultural and political ideas, which in turn enriched the theatricality of his preaching and the power of his oratory to challenge narratives of domination and slavery.

Many of the published works attributed to Wedderburn are collected in McCalman’s biography. It comprises *Truth Self-Supported*, from 1802; the short-lived 1817 periodical *Axe Laid to the Root*; an account of Wedderburn’s defence at his trial in 1820 for blasphemy; the 1824 *Horrors of Slavery*, which is mainly a correspondence between Wedderburn and his British half-brother; and another short satirical pamphlet written during his 1820 jail term. This compilation provides the primary source material for discussion in this chapter. Also featured in McCalman are several Home Office records of spy testimonials from Wedderburn’s speeches and debates. The latter documents record some of the flavour

²⁵ See Judith Bettelheim, ‘Jamaican Jonkannu and related Caribbean Festivals’ in *Africa and the Caribbean: The Legacies of a Link*, ed. by Margaret E. Crahan and Franklin Knight (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1979), pp. 80-100; and Peter Reed, ‘“There was no resisting John Canoe”: circum-Atlantic transracial performance’, *Theatre History Studies*, Vol. 27 (The University of Alabama Press: 2007), 65-83.

²⁶ Eric Pencek, ‘Intolerable Anonymity: Robert Wedderburn and the Discourse of Ultra-Radicalism’, *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, Vol 37, no.1 (2015), 73.

of Wedderburn's oral style and flair, although such partisan material must obviously be treated with extreme caution. Any reading of Wedderburn's published works must also take into consideration that as a mixed-race writer from the colonies in the early nineteenth century, questions of authenticity overhang all the texts published under his name. Writers of colour had limited access to the social, financial, religious and professional networks that facilitated publication, and were more likely to use amanuenses. Their work was also subjected to extensive editorial intervention. This vexed context was further complicated by the contemporary tendency towards maintaining fluid boundaries between composition, publication and authorial attribution – a practice applied even more assiduously in ultra-radical culture. Wedderburn's written productions were possibly drafted, written or re-written by his colleagues, and certainly influenced and edited by them. The published orations, such as the *Address to the Court of King's Bench* at his 1820 trial for blasphemy, may have undergone several layers of transcription before they made it into print. It is the transcript of this trial which the first section of this chapter will use as a base from which to explore Wedderburn's complex relationship with literacy and orality.²⁷

2.2 'You my countrymen, can act without education'²⁸

Literacy vs. Orality

When the Solicitor General at Robert Wedderburn's 1820 trial queried his ability to produce a written statement for the court, the burly preacher responded that 'it was true he could not write, but that he had caused his ideas to be committed to writing by another person.'²⁹ The question of literacy crops up repeatedly in connection with Wedderburn. All of his productions – pamphlets, treatises, contributions to newspapers, letters, addresses to politicians – must be treated in light of the fact that until late in his life, Wedderburn could not, or would not, so much as sign his own name.³⁰ Whether or

²⁷ Ryan Hanley has conducted extensive research into Wedderburn's literacy. He concludes that 'it is possible to gauge the extent to which any particular text was subject to editorial intervention, since Wedderburn's written style, [...] tended to reflect his oratory rather than grammatical convention. Works like *Truth Self-Supported* [...] [stand] in marked contrast to Wedderburn's forceful and direct spoken style, which, along with its use of the third-person throughout, [indicating] that *Truth Self-Supported* was likely to have been heavily edited. Hanley, *Beyond Slavery and Abolition*, 208.

²⁸ Wedderburn, *Axe*, No.4, in McCalman, *Horrors*, p. 86.

²⁹ *The Address of the Rev. R. Wedderburn, to the Court of the King's Bench at Westminster, 9th May, 1820*, ed. by Erasmus Perkins (London: T. Davidson), in *Ibid.*, p. 139.

³⁰ At his marriage in 1781 he could not sign the register. Guildhall Library, London, St. Katherine Kree, P69/KAT2/A/01/MS7891/1, 'Register of Marriages, 1754-1785', no. 335. At his arraignment for vagabondage at Middlesex magistrates court in 1795 he was unable to sign his name. London Metropolitan Archives, MJ/SP/1795/10/034. At his 1820 trial for blasphemy he claimed that his sight was too bad to read. Wedderburn and Cannon, *Trial*, 8. By 1831 his literacy had improved enough to write a letter but was still not at the required standard expected of a published author. BL, Add MSS. 27808, Place Papers, 'Robert Wedderburn to F[rancis] Place, 22 March 1831'. All sources in Ryan Hanley, 'A radical change of heart: Robert Wedderburn's last word on slavery', *Slavery and Abolition*, Vol. 37, No.2 (January 2016), <https://www.tandfonline.com>.

not this was a deliberate political choice is a question that prompts closer examination of Wedderburn's ambivalence towards writing, and preference for the oral mode.

Mr Wedderburn opened the debate in his usual inflammatory stile, and gave an additional proof of his infidelity by declaring that we were all born in the same way and we must all perish alike, we were but Animals, we might talk of the immortality of a Principle within us, but what was it, he never saw it, never felt it, nor did he believe a word of it.³¹

This extract from a spy report from a Hopkins Street chapel debate exemplifies the forceful argumentation and flamboyant style of Wedderburn's charismatic oratory, a flavour of which survives even these clumsy transcriptions. His gift for speaking and performance is consistently emphasised in the proceedings of the 1820 trial, a prosecution for blasphemy which reflects the troublesome nature and disruptive power of the spoken word, even in an age of literary supremacy. The Solicitor General characterises Wedderburn as 'a most dangerous character, because he certainly possesses considerable talents, and those too of a popular nature.'³² The presiding judge agrees, declaring Wedderburn's to be 'a perverted and depraved talent.'³³ In this period, literacy was politicised to such an extent that not only was the use of formal grammatical registers essential to participation in public life, but grammar, class and virtue were conflated: literate understanding was intrinsically linked to moral rectitude and sensibility. It was even a commodity which the enslaved and people of colour could exchange for their humanity.³⁴ As Linebaugh points out, literacy has always been 'a political category, containing assumptions about the values, norms and institutions of society', but in this period especially, it had been gaining an increasingly reactionary determination. Linebaugh claims that in the year 1817, 'a deliberate reaction against demotic writing reached an apogee.'³⁵

The Jamaican was already familiar with the often deadly consequences of this in plantation culture, where a literate education was a heavily-policed marker that separated Europeans from slaves. Yet in the hayloft chapel, no speaker was allowed to read from written notes. As McCalman relates, all addresses, debates and sermons had to be improvised and spontaneous. Everyone was required to speak 'on the spur of the moment', and anyone holding a pre-prepared paper was howled down.³⁶ According to Helen Thomas, where spiritual practice departs from the established religious or political order, oral forms become increasingly attractive to subaltern or marginalised groups, due to a 'subversive quality of performance, [which] prioritises the vitality of linguistic energy flow and excess which defies the

³¹ PRO HO 42/158, [15th Jan. 1817], Cited in David Worrall, *Radical Culture: Discourse, Resistance and Surveillance, 1790 – 1820*, (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 131.

³² McCalman, *Horrors*, p. 139.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

³⁴ As shown by the slave narrative genre and the example of Phyllis Wheatley, who had to convince eighteen notable Boston citizens, over a lengthy interrogation, that she was the author of her own poetry, despite being, but a few years since, 'brought an uncultivated barbarian from Africa.' In Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, p. 7.

³⁵ Linebaugh, 'A Little Jubilee?', 174.

³⁶ 'Every observation he made arose on the spur of the moment; his sermons and speeches were never the result of previous contrivance.' This is a report of Wedderburn's remarks to the court, in *Ibid.*, p. 132.

boundaries of form.³⁷ This performativity was fundamental to the community surrounding the charismatic preacher, his diminutive companion Waddington, and their actively participating audience.

Michael Scrivener, in his work on Jacobin radicalism, argues that ‘Wedderburn’s life and work was founded on plebeian and oral culture to such an extent that he was in fact alienated from print culture.’³⁸ This preference was heavily informed by the culture of the ultra-radicals. As Scrivener explains: ‘Print culture played a role in ultra-radical culture but it was subordinate to the oral culture.’³⁹ This can be attributed to a number of factors. To begin with, reading was beyond many ordinary people, as was access to printed material. Secondly, David Worrall, in his study of radical culture from 1790 to 1820, emphasises that oral discourse was a safer form of communication in a time of extreme surveillance.⁴⁰ Anything committed to paper could speedily become a form of evidence. A comparison of Wedderburn’s written texts with the spy reports of his speeches reveal the latter to be far more quarrelsome, extreme and controversial. Although spy reports may well have been exaggerated, language such as ‘my motto is Assassinate stab in the dark Oh! the 16th of August was a glorious day the Blood that was spilt on that day has cemented our Union’⁴¹ (describing Peterloo), stand in stark contrast to the passive injunction, in the 1817 periodical *Axe Laid to the Root*, to ‘use no violence against your oppressors, convince the world you are rational beings, follow not the example of St. Domingo.’⁴² This reveals both the danger, at the time, of committing radical ideas to paper, and Wedderburn’s preference for self-expression in the oral mode.

Thirdly, in ultra-radical circles authorship itself was seen as problematic. It went against the grain to claim individual ‘rights’ to information. Scholar Eric Pencek argues that ultra-radical discourse directly opposed the underlying assumptions that go with individual authorship, prioritising a unified discourse of mass radicalism. Pencek continues: ‘Wedderburn’s author-function serves to [...] express the communal voice of a class and an ideology.’⁴³ Ultra-radical culture was a subculture in which the literary text did not dominate, authority was divorced from authorship and the oral mode held sway. Walter Ong, in his influential 1982 work *Orality and Literacy*, argues that in oral cultures, the word is communal, and communication depends on participation and empathy rather than objective distance. ‘When all verbal communication must be by direct word of mouth’ Ong explains, ‘involved in the give-and-take dynamics of sound, interpersonal relations are kept high.’⁴⁴ Whereas Chirographic cultures

³⁷ Helen Thomas, p. 51.

³⁸ Scrivener, p. 13.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁴⁰ Worrall, *Radical Culture*, p. 181.

⁴¹ PRO TS 11/45/167, Rex vs Wedderburn, Deposition of Richard Dalton, [13th Oct. 1819], in McCalman, *Horrors*, p. 122.

⁴² Wedderburn, *Axe*, No.1, in *Ibid.*, p. 81. This is also an example of Wedderburn’s judicious use of appropriate register, as Hanley attests. This was written in the aftermath of Bussa’s rebellion in Barbados and Wedderburn ‘saw the need to reaffirm the capacity for reason and restraint in black West Indian slaves, [...] As such his writing provided a rare counterpoint to proslavery writers keen to link abolitionism with “the natural indolence and ferocity” of black slaves.’ Hanley, *Beyond Slavery*, p. 210.

⁴³ Pencek, 61.

⁴⁴ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 45.

‘regard speech as more specifically informational, oral cultures do not.’⁴⁵ As such, the ultra-radicals’ choice to communicate orally could be seen as both a tactical necessity and a means to strengthen their community. They were unified by oral forms of protest and dissemination, such as toasts, chants, songs and theatrical debates. These dialogic forms, where challenges and argument were actively encouraged, relied for their power of performance on unpredictable contributions from the assembled company; the strength of the resulting spectacle depended on the fluidity of its creation. In this way, orality became a democratising principle, and literacy the site of a struggle against the establishment.⁴⁶

Even Wedderburn’s published writings contain elements of Henry Louis Gates’s definition of a ‘speakerly’ text, being one whose ‘rhetorical strategy is designed to represent an oral literary tradition which emulates the phonetic, grammatical and lexical patterns of actual speech and produces the illusion of oral narration.’⁴⁷ The typographic style of Wedderburn’s publications bear many of the hallmarks of speech. This example, from a letter to a newspaper editor, mimics an oral style very closely, with frequent use of capitals, italics and exclamation marks to indicate volume changes and emphasis. Here, Wedderburn is referring to his father, James Wedderburn, ‘who sold my mother when she was with child of me, HER THIRD SON BY HIM!!! She was FORCED to submit to him, being *his* slave, THOUGH HE KNEW SHE DISLIKED HIM!’⁴⁸ Whether this letter was written by Wedderburn himself or an amanuensis, these marks of orality have survived or been purposefully included.

Similarly, Pencek draws attention to how, in the opening section of *The Horrors of Slavery*, ‘the voice mimics the practice, common in low-church, evangelical preaching, of beginning calmly, in a low key, and gradually increasing to an emotional crescendo.’⁴⁹ It begins thus: ‘The events of my life have been few and uninteresting. To my unfortunate origin I must attribute all of my miseries and misfortunes.’ The tone becomes increasingly informal, including particularly oral, rather than graphic, sentence introductions: ‘Now, what aggravated the affair was’; ‘My father’s name, as I said before’; ‘I now come to speak of the infamous manner with which’.⁵⁰ Gates attributes the ‘double-voiced’ quality of the speakerly text to the influence of the trickster figure, whose effects include satire, parody, irony, magic, indeterminacy, open-endedness and ambiguity.⁵¹ Wedderburn’s texts reflect a vernacular tradition which undercuts the literary penchant ‘at its deepest level, [...] privileging the figurative and the ambiguous.’⁵² Moreover, ‘the text is not fixed in any determinate sense [...] It consists of the dynamic and indeterminate relationship between truth on the one hand and understanding on the other [...] Meanings can be multiple and indeterminate.’⁵³

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 177.

⁴⁶ In another illustration of this, Samuel Waddington added spelling mistakes to his own work as it went to press, in a deliberately antagonistic gesture towards literary hegemony. Worrall, *Radical Culture*, p. 83.

⁴⁷ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, p. 181.

⁴⁸ Letter to the Editor of *Bell’s Life in London*, February 20th 1824. In McCalman, *Horrors*, p. 51.

⁴⁹ Pencek, 66.

⁵⁰ All from McCalman, *Horrors*, pp. 44-46.

⁵¹ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, p. 21.

⁵² Ibid., p. 22.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 25.

This instability is evident in many of Wedderburn's texts and is reflected in his ambivalence towards literacy itself. He often played, somewhat mischievously, with both its presence and absence to add to the controversy surrounding him. He referred to himself as unlettered, though he alternately over and under-played his capabilities depending on the circumstances. He issued conflicting information – and inspired conflicting views among bystanders and scholars – about his writing abilities. Wedderburn's defence at the 1820 trial represents the culmination of a lifetime of exercising this spirit of dialectical interplay. He plays up his image of 'diamond in the rough', appealing to his audience in the name of his simplicity, wielding his lack of parental care and education to inspire pity and elicit clemency from the Jury.⁵⁴ He turns his lack of education to his advantage:

If I am a low, vulgar man, incapable of delivering my sentiments in an elegant and polished manner, am I to be condemned, when I find two pages in the Bible most palpably contradicting each other, for asserting that one must be a LIE?⁵⁵

The aging preacher then goes on to deploy the inverse of that 'low, vulgar' man, exploiting instead the societal status that literacy confers:

By preventing me from preaching, they have compelled me to become an author [...] and since they have made me a member of the Republic of Letters, I beg leave to recommend to their attention a critical, historical and admonitory letter, which I have just published.⁵⁶

This is a highly ironic adoption of the authority bestowed by literacy that, for the most part, Wedderburn refuses to acknowledge, display or endorse. It lends weight to the idea that his literary capacities could be withheld or implemented at will; an inconsistency quickly seized upon by the Solicitor General, who declares: 'He calls our attention to a letter he has just published [...] how does this tally with his supposed ignorance and incapability of writing?'⁵⁷ It also demonstrates the veteran preacher's awareness of the signification of literacy as an enlightenment marker in metropolitan society.

Wedderburn was no doubt acquainted with the power dynamics of literate discourse: he must have known how effectively his fellow Black activists had mobilised the book as a campaigning tool. He also knew that in colonially-administrated Jamaica, literacy was employed against weaker parties in contests of power, such that oral understandings on written treaties like those with the maroons had been violated. Thus he describes, in *Axe Laid to the Root*, how 'a treaty was agreed on the spot, without a written document', noting in a later edition that the 'agreement with the Maroons had been broken.'⁵⁸ Given this awareness, it is notable that Wedderburn persisted in choosing to use his voice as his principal weapon. This choice was vindicated as the 1820 trial unfolded, and he was asked whether he

⁵⁴ He calls himself a diamond in the rough in *Truth Self-supported*. In McCalman, *Horrors*, p. 66.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 97; p. 110.

had any ‘affidavits to put in.’ He replied in the negative, but declared that he had ‘something to say to the court’.⁵⁹ He expounded dramatically for several minutes, focusing on his grandmother, telling the court how she was ‘a poor black slave in the island of Jamaica, several times most cruelly flogged by order of her master, a white man and a *christian*, for being a WITCH.’⁶⁰ The Lord Chief Justice then stopped Wedderburn in mid-flow, declaring that it ‘might save time and prevent him wounding the ears of the court, if the paper was read that he had in his pocket.’⁶¹ Was it through fear of Wedderburn’s rhetorical performance and satirical wit, and its effect on the jury, that the judge prevented him from speaking? He may have been anxious to prevent a repeat of the kind of content featured in the witness statement by the spy Matthew Matthewson at the outset of the trial: ‘Jesus Christ says that no man had ever seen God, then what a damned old liar Moses must have been for he tells us he could run about and see God in every bush.’⁶² ‘Then there was Balaam’s Ass, oh yes that spoke, and yet they tell us God put the words into his Mouth; then I suppose God got into the Jack Ass.’⁶³ Shocking to some, these quips must have been highly entertaining to others, especially the irreverent, disreputable constituency the authorities were so keen to repress. It seems the judge could not afford more of the same.

This impression is reinforced by further comments from the Solicitor General, which demonstrate that it was Wedderburn’s preaching that posed the main threat to the government. The official assures the old radical that it was not ‘on the score of his opinions, however offensive’ that he had condemned himself, but:

The open, scurrilous, gross, and violent manner in which he has attacked, scandalised, and reviled the Christian religion. If he had but delivered his sentiments in a cautious, decent and guarded manner, this prosecution would never have been instituted, but such language as his, addressed to the lower orders of the community, can never be tolerated.⁶⁴

Thus, even while this statement epitomises the institutional elision of grammar and civility outlined above, it simultaneously acknowledges the subversive power of Wedderburn’s speech. It implies that had his ideas appeared only in print, they might more easily have been ignored. It insists on the hegemony of literacy whilst openly acknowledging how easily its categories can be undermined. Wedderburn himself was fully conscious of this paradox, as he made clear: ‘I know I shall be told again, that ‘tis not my doctrines, but my language, for which I am prosecuted. This I contend is contemptible sophistry.’⁶⁵ Even while condemning the terms of his prosecution, Wedderburn continued to amplify his scornful rhetoric, no doubt aware of the value of the trial as a performative platform. In this light, we can conceive of his deployment of orality and repudiation of literacy as a deliberate, ideological

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 132.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 133.

⁶² PRO TS 11/45/167, Brief for the Crown, in Ibid., p. 124.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 140.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 138.

move. To wit, he was never pursued by the government for the content of his printed publications, which expressed similar sentiments in a more tightly controlled (and probably edited) fashion.

Perhaps the most compelling indicator, however, of the political potency of Wedderburn's oratory is the fact that the government was evidently so disturbed by his ability to stir up the mob that they rushed to imprison him for blasphemy despite possessing the knowledge that he was in all probability involved in the Cato street plot, passing up the chance to condemn him for the much more severe crime of treason.⁶⁶ Whatever the reason for this, as far as Wedderburn himself was concerned, the move to silence him backfired, since the trial provided him with an unprecedented outlet, achieving more than any of his previous literary efforts in bringing him to notoriety.

Those doctrines which would have been confined to my obscure chapel [...] are now by the fostering aid of my prosecutors, published to the whole world. They themselves are the means of widely disseminating that which they pretend to condemn. They have effectively advertised the very thing which they dislike.⁶⁷

Given that the government's sedition case against Wedderburn in 1819 had collapsed when he persuaded the jury that he was 'merely engaging in prophecy and divination'⁶⁸, the move to prosecute him for his outspoken religious views may have represented the only way to incarcerate him for his political ones. This conflation is unsurprising: it was at the intersection of these disparate discourses that Wedderburn most effectively deployed his theatrical voice to reach his audience. It was his ability to syncretise ultra-radical and biblical narratives that established him as a key voice in the Black Atlantic, and it is to an examination of those political and religious ingredients that this chapter will now turn.

2.3 'Acknowledge no King. Acknowledge no Priest. Acknowledge no Father.'¹

Religion and politics

A Mr Wedderburn made the most Blasphemous, Inflammatory, Incoherent harangue I ever heard. He said we might call him an Infidel, true he once professed Christianity but he was now an Infidel, Ignorance was better than knowledge, Barbarism better than Christianity [...] He sincerely hoped,

⁶⁶ 'Agents provocateurs' played a large part in orchestrating the Cato street conspiracy, ensuring that government was fully aware of the plot as it developed. The conspirators were easily apprehended at the final planning stage, with five men being executed for treason, including another mixed-race Jamaican, William Davison. Had he not been in prison, Wedderburn might well have been among the condemned. See V.A.C. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People 1770–1868* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 298-320.

⁶⁷ McCalman, *Horrors*, p. 137.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹ Brief for the Crown, in *Ibid.*, p. 125.

if there was a God he would prevent Christianity from getting amongst the Indians give us Nature and we don't want to know God we can worship the sun.²

This extract from a spy report amply demonstrates to what extent Robert Wedderburn had abandoned traditional Christian discourse. The argument delineated by Helen Thomas, that slaves could exploit the protean quality of the discourse of the spirit initiated by radical dissenting Protestantism to facilitate an 'entry into the dominant literary order', does not apply to Wedderburn, who scorned acculturation into any such established categories.³ He did not, as Mary Prince arguably did, pepper his discourse with Christian tropes in order to attain a state of dignified subject status before an imagined Western audience. Rather, he often used religious ideas as a vehicle for his radicalism. With theatrical flair, he flaunted his religious heterodoxy in order to draw political attention to himself, as this spy report from the hayloft chapel exemplifies: 'He ridiculed Scripture very much. He said that he had been endeavouring to offend that they might ring it in the ears of Kings, princes, Lords and commons.'⁴

Wedderburn's conversion to Christianity took place after hearing a Methodist preacher in the street, which is unsurprising, considering his disdain for officially sanctioned doctrine and formal settings. McCalman contends that Plebeian Methodism was feared by its critics, who warned that it 'tended to nurture socially disruptive beliefs.'⁵ However, post-colonial critic Srinivas Aravamudam contends that Methodism could be constructed to serve differing purposes, contrasting the strategy of Wedderburn with that of Equiano: 'Methodism always contained the possibility of an orthodox establishment attitude (as represented by Equiano's willingness to petition and work within the system) and also an anarchic chiliasm (as suggested by the heterodox reaction of Wedderburn).'⁶ In his early work *Truth Self-supported*, Wedderburn focuses on alternate interpretations of scripture such as: 'The author rejects the doctrine of the trinity as an error, for the Scriptures assert ONE GOD.'⁷ In later years, his religious rhetoric becomes more closely tied with his radical political sentiments, overtly linking heavenly and earthly concerns: 'God gave the World to the Children of Men as their Inheritance and they have been fleeced out of it'⁸ As such, McCalman considers Wedderburn's early period of Methodism to have been no more than a stepping stone to religious extremism.⁹ Helen Thomas agrees, arguing that 'Wedderburn's narrative [...] extends the Methodist paradigm of individualism to its furthest cultural and anarchic extreme.'¹⁰ Throughout his life he increasingly departed from all

² PRO HO 42/158, [13 Jan. 1817], Cited in Worrall, *Radical Culture*, p. 129.

³ Helen Thomas, p. 7.

⁴ PRO HO 42/195, Hopkins Street Chapel, [9th Aug. 1819], In McCalman, *Horrors*, p. 115.

⁵ McCalman, *Radical Underworld*, p. 58.

⁶ Srinivas Aravamudam, *Tropicopolitans, Colonialism and Agency, 1688–1804*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 269. E. P. Thompson agrees, stating that although Wesleyan Methodism brought the gospel to the working classes, it had the political potential to be both emancipatory and conservative. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 44.

⁷ McCalman, *Horrors*, p. 69.

⁸ PRO TS 11/45/167, Rex vs Wedderburn, Examination of William Plush, in *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁹ McCalman, *Radical Underworld*, p. 50.

¹⁰ Helen Thomas, p. 259.

denominational affinity, eventually inventing, in 1828, the doctrine of Christian Diabolism, the manifestations of which served mainly as a vehicle for airing his deep antagonism towards the established church and its clergy.

The key-stone of Wedderburn's confrontational stance was the conviction that the essential radicalism of Christ and his teachings had been obscured. The mixed-heritage preacher consistently expressed his belief in the right to question scripture in the name of that radicalism, often allying himself directly with Christ, with such declarations as: 'They may call me a traitor [...] What can the landholders, priests or lawyers say, or do more than they did against Christ?'¹¹ He prided himself on pointing out the contradictory nature of the Bible: 'Jesus Christ says no man ever conversed with God; why then his grandfather David must be a liar.'¹² And in another example:

Then there was the pretty story they tell us about the witch of Endor – Saul who had been destroying all the Witches as Devils or what not at last sends for the Witch of Endor to raise up old Samuel [...] Now Jesus Christ tells us that no-one can raise the dead but God.¹³

Scrivener argues that Wedderburn pointed out the contradictions in the Bible in order not just to undermine its overall authority, but to prove that Christianity had never been put into practice because it was too radical.

Thus you see Gentlemen there never was such a thing as Christianity ever practised in the world how unfortunate for them that after having selected four Books out of four and thirty, they should leave so many absurdities for us to find out.¹⁴

Scrivener concludes: 'Robert Wedderburn's bible contains truth and falsehood. He plays the truthful parts against the false in order to use divine authority to attack the church and its interpretive traditions that have conspired to hide the radical ideas of Christianity.'¹⁵ Hence the following accusation, which along with the passage quoted above, formed part of the evidence in the case against Wedderburn in the blasphemy trial of 1820: 'Your fat gutted parsons priests or Bishops would see Jesus Christ damned [...] rather than give up their Twenty or Thirty thousand a year.'¹⁶

Robert Wedderburn even extended this Christ-like spirit of criticism to Christ himself, as seen in this report from the verbatim testimony of a government spy: 'That bloody spooney Jesus Christ who like a Bloody Fool tells us when we get a slap on one side of the Face to turn gently round and ask them to smack the other.'¹⁷ In this way, he exploited the dramatic potential of the Bible to augment his theatrical voice, dramatizing links between biblical history and contemporary politics to justify his

¹¹ McCalman, *Horrors*, p. 83.

¹² Brief for the Crown, in *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁵ Scrivener, p. 161.

¹⁶ Brief for the Crown, in McCalman, *Horrors*, p. 124.

¹⁷ Examination of William Plush, in *Ibid.*, p. 122.

activism. Scrivener points out this example, where Wedderburn compares Jesus's entry into Jerusalem with orator Henry Hunt's return to London to a crowd of 300,000 people after the massacre at Peterloo. 'When he had that exalted ride upon the Jack Ass to Jerusalem the people ran before him crying out *HUNT FOR EVER!!!* for that was one and the same as crying out Hosanna to the son of David.'¹⁸ He also compares the government spies Reynolds and Oliver to Judas: 'Spies such as Oliver and Reynolds or such perhaps are in this Room for Jesus Christ was betrayed by a Spy.'¹⁹ Wedderburn made the bible relevant to the social and historical experience of his audience, seeking to relocate its magical authority by diverting his perception of Christ as radical into a call for political action. His scorn for the established church, argues David Worrall, sprang from his firm belief that sanctioned religion was 'an arm of the state's power.'²⁰ He declared the Church of England to be 'part and parcel of the Law of the Land.'²¹ In this 1802 passage from *Truth Self-Supported* he encourages his readers to 'see the necessity of calling upon God for yourselves [...] instead of the performances required from us under the law [...] Believing [...] is the only work that God requires from every man.'²² Thus, not only did Wedderburn extend this discourse of the questioning self to others, he extrapolated it into a rejection of the law.

God had [...] removed him by *HIS* power from a legal state of mind, into a state of Gospel Liberty, that is to say, a deliverance from the power or authority of the law, considering himself not to be under the power of the law, but under Grace.²³

This 'state of grace' releases Wedderburn from government censure, conferring spiritual immunity from the perils of sedition. It enables him to issue political proclamations such as: 'Wedderburn doth charge all potentates, governors, and governments of every description with felony, who does wickedly violate the sacred rights of man.'²⁴ Parodic statements such as these use the resonant rhetoric of political speech-making in conjunction with the tenor and cadences of the Bible to subvert authority. These cadences were present even when Wedderburn's themes were explicitly secular. This extract from the 1817 editorial of *Axe Laid to the Root No.1*, which has the subtitle *Being an Address to the Planters and Negroes of the Island of Jamaica*, advises the slave-holders to: 'Prepare for flight, O ye planters, for the fate of St Domingo awaits you.' The victorious slaves he instructs to 'live on sugar canes, and a vast variety of herbs and fruits – yea, even upon the buds of trees.'²⁵ Exclamations like 'O', 'ye' and 'yea' exploit the language of the Bible, and its fashion of mimicking oral modalities. Pronouncements such as 'Glory be to Thomas Paine. His rights of Man have taught us better than that ignorant smock

¹⁸ Brief for the Crown, in *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Worrall, *Radical Culture*, p. 181.

²¹ Brief for the Crown, in McCalman, *Horrors*, p. 124.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 70.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

faced stupid fool (the King)' openly parody church-like formulations to lend both weight and irony to Wedderburn's jibes.²⁶

Politically, Paine and Spence were the preacher's two principle touchstones. His Spencean beliefs, which he felt applied both in Britain, with the assertion of the right of commons, and in the West Indies are expounded upon in *Axe*. Issue One informs the editor of Spence's belief that 'the earth was given to the children of men, making no difference for colour or character, [...] and that any person calling a piece of land his own private property, was a criminal.'²⁷ In Issue Two, Wedderburn addresses the slaves of Jamaica, instructing them on how to govern themselves, urging them not to repeat the mistakes of the metropole:

With all the proud boasting of Europeans they are yet ignorant of what political liberty is: the Britons boast of the perfection of free government, [...] yet [...] thousands of Englishmen would give their votes to elect a member, for a cheap dinner, and a day's drunkenness.²⁸

Issues Four and Six take the form of a correspondence with his Jamaican slave-owning half-sister, Elizabeth Campbell.²⁹ He entreats her to free her slaves, telling them that she is 'instructed by a child of nature, to return to you your natural right in the soil on which you stand.'³⁰ The following passage sums up Wedderburn's feelings:

Miss Campbell, the greatness of the deed has inspired me with a zeal to extend freedom beyond present conception: Yes, the slaves shall be free, for a multiplied combination of ideas, which amount to prophetic inspiration and the greatness of the work that I am to perform has influenced my mind with an enthusiasm, I cannot support: I must give vent.³¹

This mention of 'extending freedom beyond present conception' may refer to Wedderburn's distinctive call to emancipate the enslaved wherever they are found. It is an echo of the demand, cited at the top of this chapter, that 'all slaves be set free'.³² This demand is manifest in the debate 'Can it be Murder to Kill A Tyrant?' of August 1819, where the question of whether a slave has the right to slay his master was carried unanimously. The debate was interpreted by onlookers and spies alike to be a

²⁶ From a Hopkins street chapel debate, in Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, p. 323.

²⁷ McCalman, *Horrors*, p. 82.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

²⁹ Opinions differ on the authenticity of Campbell's letters, but their distinctive style and syntax suggests they were written by Wedderburn. Rediker and Linebaugh accept their authenticity; others dismiss the existence of Campbell altogether. It is likely that Wedderburn had a sister, who showed kindness to his aging mother; whether or not she wrote the letters is a moot point; the epistolary mode was a much-used literary device in satirical publications of the time. As Hanley points out, the letters 'demonstrate Wedderburn's rhetorical sophistication and authorial dexterity rather than delegitimizing these texts as 'counterfeit'.' Hanley, 'A radical change of heart', 428.

³⁰ McCalman, *Horrors*, p. 98.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 81.

rallying cry to the victims of political repression in Britain to rise up in armed revolt.³³ One spy reports in October 1819 that Wedderburn was ‘haranguing the Company to revenge the murders done at Manchester on the 16th August.’ With this direct reference to Peterloo, he apparently addressed the meeting in the loudest voice possible: ‘Come armed or its of no use and be sure you bring plenty ammunition with you.’³⁴ Another spy testifies that in November of the same year he witnessed Wedderburn and his colleagues engaged in military manoeuvres on Primrose Hill.³⁵

Wedderburn’s position of support for both the abolition of slavery and the rights of the working poor could be characterised as unusual in the early nineteenth century. The degree of plebeian involvement in the British anti-slavery movement has been the subject of much scholarly debate. The historian James Walvin and others established that initially, abolitionism was ‘a distinct theme in the political creed of the artisan radicals in the corresponding societies,’ with their ‘Painite tone and plebeian composition.’³⁶ Solidarity with colonial slaves was expressed in public meetings by working people in large numbers, especially in the Northern cities of England.³⁷ However, the repressive Two Acts of 1795 put paid to popular radical agitation by outlawing all public meetings. The academic and politician Patricia Hollis contends that by the time the public politics of mass petitioning re-surfaced twenty years later, a number of factors had worked to alienate large sectors of the artisan class from the increasingly middle-class anti-slavery movement. Crucially, some of the ‘most ardent abolitionists were those who were most anxious to extend social and moral discipline among the English poor.’³⁸ The scholar Ryan Hanley claims that by the 1840s, ‘the default radical position appears to have shifted from one where abolitionists were natural allies in the struggle for a more egalitarian domestic politics, to one where they represented the very ‘old corruption’ that radicalism existed to challenge.’³⁹

The idea that a working-class constituency thus no longer existed which embraced support of abolition has been comprehensively challenged by Rediker and Linebaugh, who paint a picture of ‘a history of interracial cooperation that underlay the joint protests of sailors and slaves against impressment and other measures during the revolutionary era.’⁴⁰ Their historiographical project represents a recovery of working-class history previously left uncovered or ignored by conventional

³³ Ibid., p. 116.

³⁴ PRO HO 11/45/167, Rex vs Wedderburn, Deposition of Richard Dalton, in Ibid., p. 119.

³⁵ PRO HO 42/199, fo.34, John Davis, 21 Nov. 1819, in Ibid., p. 128.

³⁶ James Walvin, ‘The Rise of British Popular Sentiment for Abolition 1787–1832’, in *Anti-slavery, Religion and Reform: Essays in Memory of Roger Anstey*, ed. by Christine Bolt and Seymour Drescher (Kent: Wm Dawson and Sons, 1980), p. 153.

³⁷ For a recent history of working class abolitionism see Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*.

³⁸ Patricia Hollis, ‘Anti-slavery and British working-class radicalism in the years of reform’, in Bolt and Drescher, p. 303.

³⁹ Ryan Hanley, ‘Slavery and the birth of working-class racism in England 1814–1833’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Vol. 26 (December 2016), 107-8. Hanley concludes that it ‘should be emphasised that no consistent, universal position on abolition emerged across the entire British industrial workforce during the early nineteenth century.’

⁴⁰ Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh, ‘The Many Headed Hydra, sailors, slaves and the working class in the Eighteenth Century’, in *Gone to Croatan: Origins of North American Drop-out Culture*, ed. by Ron Sokalsky and James Koenhline (Edinburgh: AK Press), p. 140. Cited in Rice, p. 9.

historians; they posit a circularity and linking of working-class experience, from urban mobs to slave revolts and agrarian risings. This marginal and marginalised constituency included mariners such as Robert Wedderburn, some of whose formative years were spent in the navy. Gilroy, in delineating the politics and poetics of the Black Atlantic, identifies service at sea as foundational for the development of an internationalist radicalism in Black and other activists of the period.⁴¹ Whichever historiographical view we favour, what is clear is that Robert Wedderburn's standpoint had long since diverged from other representatives of the African diaspora, such as Equiano, as well as from establishment British abolitionists, due to positions such as those expressed in *Axe*: 'Do not petition, for it is degrading to human nature to petition your oppressors.'⁴²

This uncompromising stance resounds throughout Wedderburn's work, beginning with his visceral refusal to forgive his mother and grandmother's antagonists. His repeated references to the enslaved world of Jamaica are illustrative of the many threads of contrasting cultural and religious orthodoxy that ran through his childhood. McCalman notes the contribution made to Wedderburn's religious beliefs by his grandmother Amy, pointing out that throughout his life, he continued to 'believe in the formidable magical powers which she deployed when presiding over funeral rituals, placating offended spirits, and dispensing good and bad luck.'⁴³ His staunch defence of Amy, in *The Horrors of Slavery*, 'Repent ye Christians, for flogging my aged grandmother before my face, when she was accused of witchcraft by a silly European'⁴⁴ implies a gulf of ignorance on behalf of the Christian European. Wedderburn grew up in a culture where encounters such as this between traditional West African epistemological belief systems and Christianity were frequent and inevitable. Helen Thomas argues that his religious framework presents as a 'hybridised version of African and Christian belief systems.'⁴⁵ As we have seen, however, the concept of hybridity is not sufficient to describe a syncretising paradigm in Wedderburn's work which applies to multiple discourses and contexts. Can a degree of this syncretisation be accounted for by Wedderburn's creole origins. and what is the effect of this on his theatrical voice?

⁴¹ Gilroy characterises Wedderburn and his contemporaries as moving 'to and fro between nations, crossing borders in modern machines that were themselves microcosms of linguistic and political hybridity.' Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, p. 12. Alan Rice agrees with this model of exchange, pointing out that counterposing the generally accepted paradigm of a disunified plebeian constituency is the identification of a 'multiracial Atlantic working class that has only recently been fully identified by historians as pivotal in the struggles for liberty in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.' Rice, p. 11. Rice claims that Wedderburn's 'prescient acknowledgement of the interplay between race and class in capitalism highlights the limitations of a dogmatic insistence on the overwhelming primacy of race as a determining factor in the creation of Atlantic personalities.' *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴² McCalman, *Horrors*, p. 82.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁴⁵ Helen Thomas, p. 10.

2.4 'I can now write home and tell the slaves to murder their masters as soon as they please'⁴⁶

Creolization and the carnivalesque

That is the basis of the Antillean experience, this shipwreck of fragments, these echoes, these shards of a huge tribal vocabulary, these partially remembered customs, and they are not decayed but strong.⁴⁷

I came to understand that, as a colonized subject, I was inserted into history by negation, backwards and upside down – like all Caribbean peoples. [...] There were also virtues in our capacity to see the world askew, from below or backwards [...] To think in this manner enabled us to catch the world in all its unpredictabilities [...] contrary and liberating forces were also generated. My understanding of the world was creolized from the start.⁴⁸

In his recent, posthumously-published memoir the Jamaican-born cultural theorist Stuart Hall describes identity thus: 'Identity is never singular but is multiply constructed across intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions.'⁴⁹ He describes himself as 'formed as a creole.'⁵⁰ Creole is a 'shifting elastic concept', which, as he outlines above, enables the colonized subject to 'see the world askew.' Kathleen Balutansky and Marie-Agnes Sourieau, writing in 1998, define creolization as 'a syncretic process of transverse dynamics that endlessly reworks and transforms the cultural patterns of varied social and historical experiences and identities.'⁵¹ This process, as its primary proponent Kamau Braithwaite reminds us, is not 'whole or hard [...] but cracked, fragmented, ambivalent, not certain of itself, subject to shifting lights and pressures.'⁵² Indeed any attempt to define 'creole-ness' and creolization in historical and cultural contexts, as Balutansky and Sourieau emphasize, is contentious.⁵³ It is with a strong awareness of the slippery nature, multiple applications and contrasting contexts of this term that this concluding section will explore the satirical, parodic, improvisatory and dialogistic nature of Wedderburn's voice in relation to his creole background. How was the Caribbean creolized space and syncretic culture from which Wedderburn emerged, where multiplicity and heterogeneity were always in evidence and no single discourse was accorded primacy, reflected in his theatrical voice? How did that voice embody carnivalesque characteristics – instability, satire, parody, improvisation, dialogism – and employ these to subversive effect?

⁴⁶ Wedderburn announces this at the end of the debate entitled Can it be Murder to Kill a Tyrant? when the motion is carried. McCalman, *Horrors*, p. 147.

⁴⁷ Extract from Derek Walcott's Nobel Lecture. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Media AB 2018, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1992/walcott/lecture> [Accessed Mon 15th October 2018].

⁴⁸ Stuart Hall, *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands*, (London: Allen Lane, 2017), pp. 61-62.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁵¹ Balutansky and Sourieau, p. 3.

⁵² Braithwaite, *Contradictory Omens*, p. 6.

⁵³ 'The very shining nature of these terms in historical and cultural contexts marks the risk that accompanies any attempt to circumscribe either the concept or reality of "creoleness."' Balutansky and Sourieau, p. 5.

Balutansky and Sourieau attest that the question of language is at the core of any exploration of creolization. ‘In the Caribbean – as in many other parts of the world with a colonial past – most literary texts reflect a struggle with the imposed language of the colonizer in which the texts themselves are often produced.’⁵⁴ The appropriation of the language of the coloniser is an act of subversion in itself, and reflects the creolization of English as it emerged in late eighteenth century Jamaica. This is attested by the negative commentary of visiting historians and travellers, including this example from the Jamaican governor’s wife, Lady Nugent, complaining in her journal in the early 1800s, that the Creole people spoke: ‘a sort of broken English with an indolent drawing out of their words.’⁵⁵ Making the language of the coloniser one’s own can be seen in this context as a marker of independence, defiance and dignity. Wedderburn’s language has been described by Alan Rice as a new vernacular discourse, which ‘frames a new counter-hegemonic ideology that challenges the imperial polity.’⁵⁶ This implies that through Wedderburn’s ‘pugilistic vernacular’, his use of language was itself an act of subversion.⁵⁷ We have already seen how both his embrace of orality and his capacity to interlace disparate religious and political ideas form two aspects of his distinctive voice. What cultural elements bore down on its formation?

Wedderburn was brought up in the plantation society of Jamaica. Here, the imposed speech and language of English was systematically wielded by the colonisers to dismantle the African: philosophically, spiritually, historically and culturally. Wedderburn showed his awareness of this imposition, particularly in the form of missionary activity: one spy reports that he declared envoys of the Church were sent to ‘suck the blood of the poor innocent Blacks in the West Indies and to make them believe the great God was with them [...] that was sent from London by the Secretary of State.’⁵⁸ However, language was also the medium through which many Africans expressed resistance. Braithwaite attests that: ‘It was in language that the slave was perhaps most successfully imprisoned by his master, and it was in his (mis)-use of it that he most effectively rebelled.’⁵⁹ In her editorship of the 2016 essay collection *The Caribbean Oral Tradition*, Hanetha Vete-Congolo reiterates this idea that it was through the paradigm of speech that Africans resisted imperial categorical impositions, producing ‘a different system of values, [...] one that promoted diversity, and the extolment of human dignity

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 10.

⁵⁵ *Lady Nugent’s Journal of her residence in Jamaica from 1801-1805*, ed. by Philip Wright (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2002), p. 20.

⁵⁶ Rice, p. 11.

⁵⁷ Black Atlantic scholar Michael Morris describes Wedderburn’s language as a ‘pugilistic vernacular’ in Michael Morris, ‘Robert Wedderburn: Race, religion and Revolution’, *International Socialism*, Issue 132 (11th October 2011).

⁵⁸ PRO HO 42/196, Richard Dalton, ‘Wesleyan Methodists – Hopkins Street Chapel’, 10th Nov 1819, in McCalman, *Horrors*, p. 126.

⁵⁹ Braithwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica*, cited in Linebaugh, ‘A Little Jubilee?’, 177.

through sound.⁶⁰ Wedderburn's activities in the metropole typified this vigorous resistance, in his use of linguistic dexterity and oral forms. At his 1820 trial he introduces his argument as follows:

May it please your Lordships. I am well aware that the gentlemen of the bar will smile, at what they call the vanity and presumption of a humble individual like myself, in attempting to address the court on an occasion like the present. They are welcome to smile.⁶¹

This speech deploys formal vocabulary and an assumed subservience to mimic the formal modes of the court. Using words such as 'humble' it appears to endorse the hierarchy of such hegemonic institutions before applying irony to undermine it. This embodies the strategies employed by creole forms, which are described by Robert Baron and Ana Cara in *Creolization and Folklore*, as: 'reversals, mimicry, double-talk, feigned submission, and many manoeuvres, tactics and schemes designed to steal power away from "top-down" monolithic impositions.'⁶²

Similarly, in *The Horrors of Slavery*, Wedderburn uses comparable strategies to attack his white half-brother Andrew Colville, who refuses to acknowledge their relationship, through the medium of letters to a periodical. One of the letters concludes:

Mr Editor, I have to say, that if *my dear brother* means to *show fight* before the Nobs at Westminster, I shall soon give him an opportunity, as I mean to publish my whole history in a cheap pamphlet, and to give the public a specimen of the inhumanity, avarice and diabolical lust of the West-India Slave Holders; and in the Courts of Justice I will defend and prove my assertions.⁶³

Italics reinforce the fake sweetness of the satirical, accusing tone here; the threat of publishing and use of the courts exerts an authority which is quickly undercut by the adjective 'cheap', as if to emphasise the worthlessness of his half-brother's enterprise. In this parodic, double-talking attack, orality is made explicit by phrases like 'I have to say', and colloquialisms like 'show fight.' Wedderburn's argument with his half-brother is used metonymically to represent the whole system of slavery in the West Indies. This performative style echoes Benítez-Rojo's depiction of the creolized Caribbean text, as showing 'the specific features of the supersyncretic culture from which it emerges. It is without doubt a consummate performer, with recourse to the most daring improvisations to keep from being trapped within its own textuality.'⁶⁴

This decentring and destabilising of language has also been described by the scholar Kobena Mercer, who claims that in Creole cultures, rebellion is often most apparent at the level of language

⁶⁰ *The Caribbean Oral Tradition: Literature, Performance and Practice*, ed. by Hanetha Vete-Congolo (U.S.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 32.

⁶¹ McCalman, *Horrors*, p. 133.

⁶² Robert Baron and Ana C. Cara, 'Creolization and Folklore: Cultural Creativity in Process', *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 116, No. 459 (Winter, 2003), 5.

⁶³ McCalman, *Horrors*, p. 60.

⁶⁴ Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island*, p. 29.

itself. He writes that creoles, patois, and Black English ‘carnivalize the linguistic domination of [...] the master-discourse, through strategic inflections, re-accentuations and other performative moves in semantic, syntactic, and lexical codes.’⁶⁵ This carnivalesque tenor is apparent in Wedderburn’s use of ironic humour to expose injustice and highlight absurdities. He and Waddington use humour to parody politicians in theatrical performances. Prior to the debate ‘Can it be murder to Kill a Tyrant?’, Wedderburn quips that he has ‘written home to the Slaves to avoid slaying their masters until he knew the sense of that meeting’, adding, when the motion was carried: ‘well Gentlemen I can now write home and tell the Slaves to murder their Masters as soon as they please.’⁶⁶ The light comic touch, applied to such a weighty subject, the use of the biblical verb ‘slay’ juxtaposed with the practical one ‘avoid’, and the self-reflexive irony inherent in the claim to be able to manipulate the entire slave population, are all characteristic of carnivalesque laughter designed to undermine authority.

Wedderburn and Waddington’s mode of address in the hayloft chapel depended heavily on audience participation. As such, dialogism was a crucial element of the preacher’s style, with the use of frequent interruptions, questions, echoes and contributions introducing a shared role in story production and performance. Dialogism, theatricality and fluidity, Vete-Congolo tells us, are emphatically characteristic of Caribbean stories and storytellers. Active participation by the spectators ‘introduces relativity while also signalling that the held view on language and power is democratic.’⁶⁷ The crowd is an integral part of the performance. Thus, ‘the story is performed in the space of, and according to a dialectic connoting freedom. [...] A storyteller [...] is unlikely to develop the tale authoritatively if the audience withholds its consent.’⁶⁸ This view is confirmed by Benítez-Rojo, who asserts that: ‘The Caribbean performance [...] does not reflect back on the performer alone but rather directs itself toward a public in search of a carnivalesque catharsis that proposes to divert excesses of violence.’⁶⁹ This cathartic diversion of violence appears to manifest in Wedderburn’s orations, through the use of humour, which he consistently applied, even in the most fraught moments. At his most thunderous, when spies report that the aging preacher’s voice ‘almost shook [the] room’⁷⁰, Wedderburn still mobilises mocking, comic derision. When exhorting his followers, for instance, to rise up against the government in 1819, he intersperses calls-to-arms with jokes, such as: ‘But I like jolly old Peter give me a Rusty Sword for as they have declared War against the people and the Prince Regent has sanctioned it by his fine vote of thanks.’⁷¹

⁶⁵ Mercer quoted in Charles C. Stewart, *Creolization: History, Ethnography, Theory* (Walnut Creek: Routledge, 2010), p. 9.

⁶⁶ PRO HO 42/195, Hopkins Street Chapel, [9th Aug. 1819] in McCalman, *Horrors*, p. 115.

⁶⁷ Vete-Congolo, p. 41.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island*, p. 22.

⁷⁰ PRO HO 42/196, Richard Dalton, 10th Nov 1819, in McCalman, *Horrors*, p. 127.

⁷¹ The ‘fine thanks’ refers to the Regent congratulating the authorities at Manchester for ‘controlling’ the crowds at the Peterloo massacre. In *Ibid.*, p. 122.

Carnavalesque buffoonery, as Sylvia Wynter explains, was often present in Caribbean folk traditions such as Jamaican Jonkonnu. This form of Christmas revelry can be traced to the seventeenth century, and arose from a cultural collision of yam, harvest and recreational festivals of the Ibo, Yoruba and Ga people with English traditions such as mumming and Morris dancing. Jonkonnu was played out in Jamaica through ‘song, dance, legends, stories, myths, plays, ritual.’⁷² Wynter emphasises that these animations ‘served to ritually reverse the usual order of things and behaviour’, breaking down some of the barriers between black and white in plantation society.⁷³ Though they were sometimes seen as harmless fun by the planters, the rituals of Jonkonnu, which combined traditions originating in West Africa with English folk characters such as the hobby horse, functioned to reverse authority and satirise the ‘power structure and hierarchy of colour.’⁷⁴ Historian and theatre scholar Peter Reed also characterises Jonkonnu as a tension-fraught performance that constantly acts out the reversal of power structures. Reed explores the impact of Jonkonnu on Metropolitan cultural forms, in the context of Black Atlantic studies. He notes its influence on at least one of the transatlantic characters who peopled London’s streets in the late eighteenth century,⁷⁵ as well as on the London / New York production *Obi, or Three-Finger’d Jack*. This popular pantomime featured a Jamaican Maroon whose unsuccessful rebellion was defeated with the help of enslaved people loyal to the regime. Despite its overwhelmingly conservative message, Reed contends that the play ‘staged one of the earliest theatrical inklings of the black Atlantic’s growing restlessness.’⁷⁶ He asserts that ‘Paul Gilroy’s now-classic paradigm of a multiply-centred black Atlantic space certainly seems to define Jonkonnu’s Atlantic wanderings.’⁷⁷ Reed suggests that Black Atlantic subjects such as Wedderburn performed Black identity ‘within and against the circulating cultural forms of the Atlantic world.’⁷⁸ Jonkonnu’s carnivalesque performance practices, he continues, being ‘stereophonic, bilingual, or bifocal cultural forms’ represented ‘acted, improvised, living instances of culture’, offering a metaphor for understanding ‘the complex relationships between difference and unity, connection and disjunction in cultural practices’, in colonised societies.⁷⁹

Wedderburn used such carnivalesque forms to pointedly ridicule the elite, aiming his fire at hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions, and predicating his activities on the production of a dissenting and motivated political opposition involved in a radical communitarian project. This can be seen in some of his later work, after he emerges from jail in 1822. *Cast-Iron Parsons, or Hints to the Public and the Legislature on Political Economy*, is a nine-page satirical joke, which proposes a money-

⁷² Wynter, 45.

⁷³ Ibid, 43.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 42.

⁷⁵ The well-known Black beggar and entertainer Jack Johnson wore a ship on his head, reminiscent of the houseboat headgear that featured prominently in some Jonkonnu rituals.

⁷⁶ Reed, 76.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 83.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 82.

saving plan to replace the clergy with cast-iron robots. Wedderburn reasons that ‘the routine of duty required of the Clergy of the *legitimate* Church, is so completely mechanical, and that nothing is so much in vogue as the dispensing with human labour by the means of machinery.’⁸⁰ Here, he wittily juxtaposes religious dissension with the political issues of the day, going on to suggest extending the patent to politicians, who could be ‘so constructed as to say *Aye* and *No* in the right place’; and even to Kings, who are ‘mere drones, sunk in debauchery and licentiousness.’⁸¹ This heterodox oratory exemplifies Wedderburn’s application of the popular corrective of laughter directed at established religious and cultural forms. His revolutionary principles are played out in this way through the expression of both European and African folk motifs present in Jamaican cultural forms.

Wedderburn’s theatrical voice, therefore, drew on a kind of ‘intertextual’ self, oscillating between competing narratives and influences, finding its roots in both the folk narratology of his maternal inheritance – West Indian trickster traditions, West African religious epistemologies – and the tropes of dissenting Protestantism. The volatility and unpredictability of his voice, as I have attempted to show, displayed a distinct carnivalesque quality that strove to undermine literary, spiritual, political, cultural and social hegemony. As such, Wedderburn’s rejection of literacy, and deployment of oral theatricals and spectatorship in the public space, harnesses the power of folk laughter, as defined in the 1960s by Soviet-era scholar Mikhail Bakhtin, the first literary critic to formally delineate the characteristics of the carnivalesque. In *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin might have been describing Robert Wedderburn himself, in the following fulsome account of the key attributes of the mode. Festive folk laughter, wrote Bakhtin, had the power to achieve: ‘an element of victory not only over supernatural awe, over the sacred, over death; it also means the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts.’⁸²

⁸⁰ Wedderburn, Rev, R, *Cast-Iron Parsons, or hints to the public and the legislature on political economy*, (London: Thomas Davison) in McCalman, *Horrors*, p. 145.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁸² Bakhtin, p. 92.

Chapter Three: Staging Atlantic Slavery

*'The very genesis of theatre, whether you go to the Greeks, or Africa, or Asia, is really located within the rituals of people's lives.'*¹

3.1 Introduction

The final chapter of this thesis sets out to explicate the relationship between the creative and critical work presented here. Although the critical research undertaken both shaped and demonstrably underpinned the dramatic scripts, the scholarly work was also influenced and directed by the creative endeavour. The impetus for engaging with this literary and historical study of performative constructions of Atlantic slavery and abolition in Britain was the discovery of my personal ancestral links with slave-holding; however, over the course of this study what became increasingly clear was the need to address the legacies of the institutions of slavery and abolition and their survival in British society, namely in the collective memory and structures, in creative productions and in forms of commemoration. At the time of writing, the police killing in May 2020 of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man on the other side of the Atlantic, has sparked world-wide re-evaluations of racialisation as a contemporary reality; the Black Lives Matter movement and other popular protest has engendered widespread re-examinations of systemic and personal attitudes towards the cultures and discourses of racialisation endemic in post-colonial societies in the global north. Apologies and questions around reparations for slavery are once again topics for discussion in corporations, government and the media. The academic and cultural outcomes that will emerge from these animations have yet to be seen. The trilogy of stage plays that intersects with the critical and historical work of this doctorate was conceived prior to the events of 2020, however the subjects the plays treat relate closely to the discourses and debates fomented by recent events: each of them in different ways aspires to trace the presence and relevance of history in the present day. This chapter will attempt to define and analyse some of the theoretical and imaginative intersections that informed their creation, focusing one or two aspects only for each play.

The historian Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace, in her study of the British slave trade and public memory, maintains that the contemporary reader or viewer often expects representations of the past to reflect 'a reality that bears an unmistakable resemblance to the time in which we ourselves are living.' Wallace argues that in this process, the idea that a novel or film 'reflects a stable and "knowable" past

¹ Barbadian director Earl Warner speaking in 1983, quoted in Judy Stone, *Studies in West Indian Literature: Theatre* (London: Macmillan, 1994), p. 143.

hides the role of the narrative art in any historical reckoning.² This paradigm becomes particularly apposite when applied to formulations treating Britain's past, and this nation's part in the abolition of slavery. A focus on particular characters, or 'heroes', often prevails, in which anachronistic religious convictions, unfashionable world-views or unsavoury personal failings are frequently edited out, sometimes in an apparent effort to perpetuate narratives of national heroism. William Wilberforce has remained a fixture in this pantheon of national icons, resulting in hagiographic depictions such as the 2006 film *Amazing Grace*.³ It could be argued that Wilberforce's contribution to the dismantling of slavery can be unambiguously celebrated in a post-colonial society in which many previously-lauded national events, historical achievements and traditional attributes have become more complex and ambivalent. Whether for this or other reasons, as a personality, Wilberforce has come to embody and symbolise what many white Britons still see as 'among the three or four perfectly virtuous pages comprised in the history of nations.'⁴

Wilberforce's enduring legacy is in part a rhetorical one: his performative oral strategies in Parliamentary speeches can now be seen as constructing and mobilising 'Britishness' in the cause of enlightenment theories of humanitarianism.⁵ This rhetoric continues to resonate with today's preferred conceptions of what it means to be British. The film *Amazing Grace* chose to concentrate particularly on Wilberforce's personality and his persuasive rhetoric. In such productions, a focus on one or two engaging personality traits enables and encourages the elision and exclusion of the more disturbing aspects of the 'story' of slavery and abolition. As Wallace observes, such period films, 'with their

² Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace, *The British Slave Trade and Public Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 77. The historian Natalie Zemon Davis also warns against the dangers of remaking the past in familiar terms, encouraging researchers to remain open to unexpected, strange or surprising aspects of history that do not fit with what they have come to expect history to look like. In Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision* (Canada: Random House, 2000).

³ *Amazing Grace*, dir. by Michael Apted (Bristol Bay/Samuel Goldwyn Films, 2006). This film, like many other publications, programmes and websites dedicated to William Wilberforce, gives little space to his other self-described great mission: the 'reformation of manners', which involved the 'suppression of vice' exacted upon an overwhelmingly plebeian constituency. 'God Almighty has sent before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners.' Wilberforce's journal of 28th October 1787, quoted in Hague, p. 141. Wilberforce and others founded *The Society for the Suppression of Vice* in 1787, which campaigned against 'excessive drinking, blasphemy, profane swearing and cursing, lewdness, profanation of the Lord's Day, and other dissolute, immoral, or disorderly practices.' Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, p. 126. Events such as the 1816 meeting chaired by Wilberforce for members and friends of the African and Asian Society, where Black people were separated from the whites by a screen, invariably fail to surface in films such as *Amazing Grace*. Source: Fryer, p. 234.

⁴ This comment by Victorian historian W. E. H. Lecky in 1886 has been quoted in most subsequent histories. E.g. In Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, p. 453.

⁵ A corroborating example from a Commons debate on abolition: Wilberforce expresses the view that the House feels 'the justice and honour of the British nation to be deeply and peculiarly involved in the great object they have in view.' Hansard, 10th June 1806, Vol. 7, 603. A typical response from a parliamentary colleague: 'Before I sit down, let me congratulate [...] Mr. Wilberforce upon [...] his unwearied industry, his indefatigable zeal, and his impressive eloquence, in thus bringing [...] a measure which does so much honour to his head and heart, and which washes out this foul stain from the pure ermine of the national character.' Sir John Doyle, Hansard, Slave Trade Abolition Debate, 23rd February 1807, Vol. 8, 977.

romantic aesthetic and their relentless desire to ‘humanise’ characters, [cannot] adequately address the complexities of motivation, causation or [...] impersonal historical process.’⁶ In an exploration of how such narratives function, Emma Waterton et al draw attention to the ways in which they fulfil a desire for positive collective memories on a national level. Building on sociocultural anthropologist James Wertsch’s 2008 work on collective memory, they draw attention to particular means of performing reconciliation, which occur through absences or omissions in collective memory.⁷ They note that in the case of creative interpretations of slavery and abolition, ‘schematic narratives are called upon to sketch out abstract storylines that simplify or ignore conflicting interpretations of [the] past.’⁸ These types of narratives, according to Wertsch, reinforce how individuals think and respond to the past, and can become deeply embedded in people’s understanding.

Amazing Grace, according to Waterton et al, links its representation of Wilberforce’s part in abolition with claims to the upholding of so-called British values. They assert that the film plays a ‘crucial role within the wider order of discourse’ framing the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in 2007. The movie ‘adopts a schematic narrative template, which promotes ideals of benevolence, heroism, togetherness and justice when assessing British involvement in ending the slave trade.’⁹ They continue:

Significantly, this telling of a story about abolition and Wilberforce foregrounds a set of widely self-assumed positive qualities of British identity, while simultaneously downplaying its more negative and traumatic aspects. The consequence of this is that the story told in the movie, along with the narrative template it draws upon, creates a blank spot in the cultural memory of Britain, as trauma and brutality are conveniently forgotten.¹⁰

Similarly, the film scholar Ross Wilson comments on how choices made in the production of representations of the past tend towards certain ‘preferred versions’. In consequence, consumption and production become ‘locked in a recursive cycle perpetuating the conditions, beliefs and structures of society.’¹¹ As Waterton et al conclude: ‘many national attempts to reflect self-consciously on a difficult past have been held in check by an implicit and often insidious desire to repudiate senses of collective

⁶ Wallace, p. 139.

⁷ Emma Waterton, Laurajane Smith, Ross Wilson and Kalliopi Fouseki, ‘Forgetting to Heal: Remembering the abolition act of 1807’, *European Journal of English Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2010), 23-36.

⁸ James V. Wertsch’s article ‘The Narrative Organization of Collective Memory’ quoted in Waterton et al, 24.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Wilson, Ross, ‘Remembering to Forget? – The BBC Abolition Season and Media Memory of Britain’s Transatlantic Slave Trade’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (2008), 391–404 (p. 401).

guilt.’ This can lead to a ‘fending off of attributions of ‘blame’ and ‘guilt’ by the mobilization of collective memories that either justify or ignore negative aspects of a group’s history.’¹²

This excursus on the national obsession with Wilberforce and the film *Amazing Grace* is intended to underscore a perceived fault line in cultural interpretations of historical events and figures relating to Atlantic slavery and British abolitionism. Many historical stories in filmic formats have maintained a relentless focus on abolition (as opposed to slavery itself), alongside a manifest tendency to remain dietetically and teleologically congruent with imperialist accounts of the formation of nationality or nationhood. Accordingly, dramatic depictions of slavery and abolition have rarely located enslaved people in proximity with metropolitan Britain: audiences in the U.K. are generally more familiar with their situation in North American plantations.¹³ One recent large-scale commercial project chose to remake the popular television series *Roots* rather than risk a more recent or proximate interpolation.¹⁴ In the light of this, Mary Prince’s declaration that she wanted to let English people ‘know the truth’, so that they would ‘call loud to the great King of England’ to put an end to slavery, with its implication that the English were ignorant of the lived realities of West Indian slavery, still sounds a resonant note today.¹⁵ Prince expressed amazement on discovering that many English people cherished the belief that not all enslaved people desired their freedom. She exclaimed: ‘I never heard a Bukra man say so, till I heard tell of it in England.’¹⁶ Could it be that the geographical disconnect between the Caribbean and Britain, which Prince never tired of pointing out, continues to enact on current generations? In scripting *Mother Country*, the play that accompanies the research on *The History of Mary Prince*, the location of the story in London therefore became of paramount importance.

3.2 *Mother Country*: Mary and Susanna

The popular belief, from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, that enslaved people became free when they arrived in mainland Britain, has worked to obscure the confusion, fear and obfuscation that often accompanied the presence of Black people in towns and cities across Great Britain in the period.¹⁷ Prince’s fight for manumission was fraught with uncertainty, even on the eve of emancipation in Britain, Mauritius and the Cape.¹⁸ Physically and metaphorically, therefore, the site of the meeting between

¹² Waterton et al, 23. See also Tom Brown, ‘Consensual Pleasures: *Amazing Grace*, Oratory and the Middlebrow Biopic’, in *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture*, ed. by Tom Brown and Belen Vidal (New York: Routledge, 2014).

¹³ Steve MacQueen’s 2013 *Twelve Years a Slave* takes place largely in the American South.

¹⁴ *Roots*, dir. by Bruce Beresford (History Channel, 2016).

¹⁵ Ferguson, *The History*, p. 94.

¹⁶ Ibid. ‘Bukra’ refers to a white man.

¹⁷ See section 1.2 for an exploration of the legality of slavery on British soil.

¹⁸ See Fryer for cases of previously enslaved people seized and re-patriated to the colonies. pp. 114-132.

Prince and Strickland is freighted with significance. *Mother Country* takes place over a single day, in a small attic room, where Prince dictates her story to Strickland. We know from the historical record that the two women lived in the same house, in Claremont Square in Pentonville, London. Unfortunately, *The History* and its editorial material yield up little information about the relationship between the two. On one occasion, Prince refers to Strickland as ‘my good friend Miss Susanna’, which implies not only a degree of intimacy but also an element of equality and alliance.¹⁹ Strickland mentions Prince on two occasions in her letters, the first of which affords an interesting glimpse into her attitude to the project, highlighting as it does the younger woman’s absence as much as her presence:

I have been writing Mr. Pringle’s black Mary’s life from her own dictation and for her benefit [...] It is a pathetic little history and is now printing in the form of a pamphlet [...] Of course my name does not appear.²⁰

The second mention comes in a description of Strickland’s own wedding day, demonstrating that the relationship between the two women had endured beyond the writing of the narrative, and affording us one of the only extant references to Mary Prince after its publication: ‘Black Mary, who had treated herself with a complete new suit upon the occasion, went on the coach box, to see her dear Missie and Biographer wed.’²¹ This picture of a kind of friendship, however condescending it appears from Strickland’s side, provides a persuasive nexus for thinking about the subjectivity of female abolitionists in Britain from the 1780s through to the 1830s. As we have seen, the dynamic of spectatorship set up by anti-slavery literature could prove problematic. The making or bestowing of humanity through sympathetic witness often only reproduced gendered and racialised privilege. Despite the frequent parallels drawn between the state of slavery and women’s status within the institution of marriage, any thoughts of sisterhood are clearly wishful thinking.²² In a creative work, it is possible, nevertheless, to imagine that in the course of this meeting between the young white woman and the older Black woman, some form of recognition, however compromised, could have passed between them.

The foundational African American thinker and novelist James Baldwin considers the possibilities of mutuality in such unequal and un-reciprocal encounters in his essay, ‘Stranger in the Village.’ He writes:

¹⁹ Ferguson, *The History*, p. 94.

²⁰ From a letter by Susanna Strickland. Quoted in *Ibid.* p. 26.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²² At a reception to celebrate the wedding of anti-slavery activist Priscilla Buxton, daughter of Thomas Fowell Buxton on Emancipation Day, 1st August, 1834, a toast was made to the bride, that she might ‘long rejoice in the fetters put on that day as well as over those which she had assisted to break.’ This speech was reported in her friend and fellow activist Anna Gurney’s journal. Quoted in Midgley, p. 101.

The black man insists by whatever means he finds at his disposal, that the white man cease to regard him as an exotic rarity and recognise him as a human being. This is a very charged and difficult moment, for there is a great deal of will power involved in the white man's naïveté.²³

It is the exploration of this 'charged and difficult moment' which offers such dramatic potential to the encounter between Prince and Strickland. The breaking down of the willpower involved in the white (wo)man's – in this case, Susanna's – naïveté, constitutes a compelling subject for a stage confrontation. Baldwin's observation also serves to draw attention to both characters' positionality in relation to the modern audience. Whether we consider our surrogate in the play to be Strickland or Prince (or neither of them), the complex dynamic of witnessing and spectatorship engendered by the pairing, with its accompanying potential for scopophilia, bears down to a degree on today's audience, just as it did on the 1830s readership of the *History*. The effects of the production of empathy need vigilant management, and the lines between identification and voyeurism must be carefully negotiated. Stephen Ahern contends that the depiction of sentimental or physical excesses can act to distance the viewer from the viewed, creating a surplus of meaning that is both aesthetic and political. The resulting slippage can mean that the 'consumer of such texts devours them like "bon-bons", free of ethical engagement', where the cathartic action of witnessing others' pain causes the need to act to disappear.²⁴

This raises the substantial question of the interface between historical and artistic representation. What material should be foregrounded, enacted and embodied, and what should be left out? How to enable a faithful representation of Prince's account of her suffering creatively, without on the one hand appropriating the Black female body, or on the other, replicating the dynamic of ellipsis and erasure that was originally enacted on the text? The inclusion of scenes of physical abuse risks actively reproducing the subjection such depictions are intended to controvert. Saidiya Hartman's refusal to include, in her book *Scenes of Subjection*, the American ex-slave Frederick Douglass's account of the beating of his Aunt Hester, calls attention to 'the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated, [...] and the consequences of this routine display of the slave's ravaged body.'²⁵ As Sara Salih emphasises, unflinching re-enactments of the worst aspects of colonial slavery through the repeated obsessive representation of the physical punishment of the Black body can engender a double putting-down of the enslaved subject: first the act, then its reproduction as visual image, anecdote, or in this case, dramatization. The slave here becomes 'an entity with no rights', and the site of 'an epistemological and erotic opportunity'; the viewer is being invited to imagine herself in the enslaved's body: there is an auto-erotic as well as a sympathetic impulse.²⁶ In scripting *Mother Country*, I wanted

²³ James Baldwin, 'Stranger in the Village', in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), pp. 174–75.

²⁴ Ahern, p. 7.

²⁵ Hartman, p. 3.

²⁶ Sara Salih, 'Putting down Rebellion: Witnessing the Body of the condemned in Abolition Era Narratives', in *Slavery and the Cultures of Abolition: Essays marking the bicentenary of the British Abolition Act of 1807*, ed. by Brycchan Carey and Peter Kitson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007), p. 66.

to follow Hartman's example, by avoiding the repeated representation of scenes of physical subjection. Uppermost in my mind was the ever-present danger inherent in many writing projects, that of cultural appropriation, coupled with a misguided appropriation of the Black body. This impulse, however, inevitably led to the equally challenging question of how to theatrically represent Prince's visceral suffering, which is so lucidly described in *The History*.

The solution to this proved to be multi-faceted. I chose to draw attention to the problem from the outset by including reflexive references to it, such as the character Susie's description of the task of the writer, when she is encouraging Mary to elaborate on her life story. At the end of Act II, Susie announces: 'When we write, we try to describe. To imagine ourselves there. [...] We must recreate. Entice the reader, make it attractive. [...] As writers, we must paint a picture with words.'²⁷ This declaration works metonymically to draw attention to the dilemma of both the characters and the writer. Having thus flagged up the issue from the start, I also found numerous ways to circumvent or mitigate it. By limiting the relation and exposition of Prince's physical and sexual abuse to a small selection of scenes, I was able to incorporate her revelations dialogically in a manner which accorded with the emotional tenor of the two women's exchanges. The use of rhetorical devices, such as transplanting the pronoun 'I' with that of 'you' in some of Prince's descriptions, enabled a 'widening' of Prince's predicament, whilst also implicating both the audience and Strickland herself. By deploying direct address, I was able to engage the audience in Prince's monologues, thus decreasing the potential for scopophilia, whilst ensuring spectator involvement and strengthening the story's contemporary relevance. By allowing for discretion and flexibility in the actress's use of her body, I capitalised on one of the more obvious advantages of drama over text: the fact that the theatrical gaze can be constantly revised through active reception. Physical interpretation of script and scenario in theatrical productions is subject to multiple re-interpretations and adaptations by directors, producers, actors, managers and stage designers. The responsiveness and flexibility of live performance can transform and vivify a script, which in this case, included cultural modifications that I hoped would be brought to the play by my collaborators.²⁸

This potential impact on the script by directors and actors proved especially important in relation to the signification of the body. As Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins assert in *Post-colonial Drama*, the body functions as 'one of the most charged sites of theatrical representation.'²⁹ The female colonised subject's body, as Gilbert and Tompkins explain, has been an object of the coloniser's fascination, repulsion and possession in sexual, pseudo-scientific, political and legal terms. Subsequently, paying

²⁷ *Mother Country*, p. 132. Footnotes to my own plays will refer to page-numbers in this document.

²⁸ *Mother Country* was produced in January 2020 by Norwich Arts Centre, directed by Sonia Williams from Barbados, who brought her own distinctive experience to the production.

²⁹ Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, *Post-colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 203.

attention to the body can be a highly useful strategy for ‘reconstructing post-colonial subjectivity.’³⁰ Gilbert and Tompkins emphasise that the body’s ‘ability to cover up, reveal itself and even fracture on stage provides it with many possible sites for decolonisation’; hence it becomes an important site for resistant inscription.³¹ They argue that the aim of the project of redefining staged identity is to ‘affix the *colonised* choice of signification to the body rather than to maintain the limited tropes traditionally assigned to it.’³² Embodiment therefore became a crucial aspect of the depiction of Mary Prince: one which depended to a large extent on dramatic interpretation.³³ Some of the weight of this representation can also be carried by ritual and music. Prince expresses her rebellion and frustration in the form of a song at the end of Act III. Here, she covers her face in talcum powder (a white-face carnivalesque ritual seen in many islands in the Caribbean), and sings / chants a traditional song about the rape of slave women by their white masters. In another instance early in the play, as a provocation to Strickland, Prince sings a subversive song about black women giving birth to white children, while she dusts. These moments of song and dance unsettle the power dynamic by introducing intimations of Prince’s physical and sexual power. They also exploit the contradictory conditions of colonial relations to introduce a subversive element to Prince’s expression of resistance; both these elements are profoundly unsettling to Strickland, and contribute to the status reversal that takes place between the two women, which is incremental, based as it is in many such small incidents and exchanges.

Staging *The History of Mary Prince* in a twenty-first century post-colonial context invites a re-evaluation of our relationship to Prince’s text as well as to her body. The fictive nature of the project and the release from the need to continually re-assert objectivity enabled me to use research and parallel texts to fill in the blanks, such as the lack of information about children. Whilst freeing characters from the particular constraints of their historical contexts can sometimes leave them unmoored and unconvincing, its practice can also be informed by up-to-date revisions of historical discourses. Numerous post-colonial referents facilitated my additions to and reinterpretations of the text. For instance, Prince was required to perform the discourse of emancipation without referring to her sexual life at all. This sizeable omission meant the excision of what may have constituted her most insufferable experiences, and conversely the possibility of some form of control or exercise of agency. The insertion of sexual abuse into the story comes not only from current knowledge about enslaved women’s lives, but the seeds of it can be found in Prince’s own frequent use of the word shame. Assumptions about Prince’s use of sexual relationships to gain power stem again from post-colonial and contemporaneous accounts, but also from her own declarations in the court case that followed publication.³⁴ Equally, my

³⁰ Ibid., p. 204.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., p. 205.

³³ For example, in Act IV when Prince reveals her scarred body to Susanna, discretion can be exercised as to the extent of the revelations.

³⁴ See 1.6 for details.

introduction of a note of irony into Prince's declarations about religion, such as when she declares, early in Act I: 'I enjoy the privilege of attending church three times on a Sunday. [...] I pray God to forgive my sins. Seems there are many. Me never knew how many till me went there', was informed by the knowledge that her piety may have been given disproportionate attention in the original account by her abolitionist mentors.³⁵

I chose to place the main dramatic emphasis on the interaction between the two women, an aspect considered entirely unimportant to the formation of the text at the time of publication. This enabled the foregrounding of narratives of race, gender and identity now acknowledged as central to subjectivity, through both the literal and cognitive juxtaposition and manoeuvring of the play's two characters in the theatrical space. In *Mother Country*, verbal sparring between the two women exposes some of the more disturbing aspects of colonial discourse, such as the sexual exploitation of enslaved women by white men, a narrative thread woven throughout the play. Equally, the opaque legal position of Black people in Britain at the time, which the women discuss on more than one occasion, is especially cogent at the beginning of Act II, when Susanna capitalises on the uncertain legal status of slaves to frighten and manipulate Mary into telling her story. The legacies of this historical, colonial discourse, still present in contemporary narratives of race, migration and identity, are mapped onto the historical encounter, revealing the far-reaching connections between Britain and its colonial past, and posing questions of belonging and alienation that still resonate today. Refugees and immigrants in the twenty-first century are still subject to the vagaries of the legal system, often with tragic consequences, such as we have seen with the Windrush scandal, which brought to light in April 2018 the British government's hostile environment and the denial of legal rights to employment, healthcare, and settlement for the Windrush generation and their children.³⁶ Prince's character draws attention to both historical and contemporary anomalies when she declares, at the close of Act I:

Now you pretending like the West Indies got nothing to do with you. You have cut off the limb and set it loose from the motherland, while its children still hanging from your tits.

Will you make me remember? Remember and repeat, repeat, repeat until me suffering become like dust in me mouth? [...] You will cut open my body. For years to come you will be exposing me and feeding on my flesh.³⁷

Any representation of the past must endeavour to find metaphorical links with present realities, and set up a meaningful exploration of this dialectic. Post-colonial theatre is uniquely placed to stage the contradictions of the colonial history of the present, and in *Mother Country* those elements are

³⁵ *Mother Country*, p. 118.

³⁶ See www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/apr/20/the-week-that-took-windrush-from-low-profile-investigation-to-national-scandal.

³⁷ *Mother Country*, p. 123.

traceable to the link between Prince and the journeys and experiences of numerous colonised subjects to the United Kingdom. Prince was one of the first of many people from formerly colonised countries determined to be recognised by metropolitan society as human beings. Mobilising her life story in comparative perspective as a metaphor to symbolise others' struggles, whether appropriate or otherwise, is part of a continuum of interpretation Prince's narrative has undergone in the years since it was published. Gillian Whitlock, in *The Intimate Empire*, observes that this autobiography, in its own day as now, has been subjected to multiple and various re-assignments, including gendered and racial readings, as editors and scholars continue to interpret it for different cohorts of readers and varying socio-political agendas.³⁸ Whitlock, alongside other critics such as A. M. Rauwerda, K. Merinda Simmons and Jessica Allen, wishes to avoid reductive, gendered, metonymical, personalised or homogenising readings of the narrative, stressing the importance of acknowledging its complex cultural and historical situated-ness. Whitlock rejects the gendered reading of such female texts as a part of a continuity or community of shared, trans-historical, female stories. Equally, Simmons warns against singular and identifiable ethnic and gendered categorisations resulting from a search for an 'authentic' or 'unique' voice in Mary Prince's text. She writes: 'To insist upon an "individual voice" and simultaneously use that voice to speak for an entire collective is to reduce dynamic signs like "race," "gender," and "work" to fixed constructions.'³⁹ Prince's most recent editor, Sara Salih, is similarly wary of moves to reconstruct and recruit Prince's text for a variety of Black canons, while describing its author as a figure of resistance, or the founder of a national or racial tradition. She argues that to install Mary Prince and the *History* 'as inaugural and canonical overlooks the instability of the former along with the striking intra- and inter-textuality of the latter.'⁴⁰

While I concur with the wish to avoid reductive interpretations of the *History*, my priority remained the pressing need to disseminate Prince's story – placing its fate in the hands of a public to enable those discussions to take place. The balance that I attempted to achieve, in making decisions about re-encoding aspects of the narrative, is informed by Sandra Pouchet Paquet's work on Mary Prince. She concludes that:

No matter how the question is approached, the coercive or collaborative status of Strickland and Pringle is as much a part of the value of the text as the constraints imposed by the genre of the slave narrative itself. The imbalances of race, class, and gender hierarchies are only partly recoverable in the ambiguous politics of the text. The paradox is that even in its mediated form

³⁸ Whitlock, *The Intimate Empire*, p. 2.

³⁹ Simmons, 78.

⁴⁰ Carey, Ellis and Salih, p. 124.

Prince's narrative endures as a testament to her life and struggle and offers rare insight into the formation of selfhood, narrative authority, and social identity among Caribbean slaves.⁴¹

The singular nature of the narrative, and the heavy odds that were overcome to produce it must be acknowledged. Unease over the appropriateness of shallow identification is also countered by a requirement to register that whilst this text is undeniably singular, in terms of form and content, Prince's subject position was far from unique. The historical moment, whereby the exigencies of abolitionist propaganda combined fortuitously with Prince's force of personality, brought us *The History of Mary Prince*, but hers is an experience that we must imagine repeated in similar form all over the West Indies. The invidious circumstances that Prince endured were replicated throughout the plantation slavery system. As such, her spirited refutations of the narratives of domination and slavery epitomise and memorialise those of innumerable enslaved women across the Caribbean forever consigned to silence.

⁴¹ Paquet, p. 33.

Mother Country

by Mags Chalcraft-Islam

Characters

Mary Prince (*around 40*) West Indian

Susanna (Susie) Strickland (*around 22*) English

Prologue

Mary I dreamed I was up to my knees in salt. I was on Turk's island once more, wading in the briny field. I heard my mother calling, Mary, my heart. She was on a ship, the ship was in the harbour, and the sails were curling like petticoats around the stout legs of the masts. Then I woke up, and remembered I was in the mother country, where my name is nothing but a mist on the glass of the windows.

If I tell you that I am not afraid, do not believe me. To keep a tight rein on the truth is not to lie. Not where I come from. When I say I don't hate myself, do not give it any credit. If I tell you your men did not fuck me, your husbands and your sons did not fuck me, do not believe it.

We are taught to hate what is most like ourselves. Who taught us this? Why you did.

I.

1830. A bare attic room in a London townhouse, with a small window, shuttered. The only furniture is a large desk and two chairs.

Inside the desk drawers: a notebook and pen, a hand mirror, talcum powder, a bottle of sherry and two glasses, a bundle of reports and letters.

Mary, with a bucket and scrubbing brush. She searches the floor. Finally she drops to her knees, with difficulty, and scrubs.

Susie appears, holding a bunch of stocks and a vase.

Susie Here you are, Mary. I've searched the entire house for you.

Mary struggles back to her feet.

Mary Good morning, Miss Susie.

Susie I see you've found my new study. Gloomy, isn't it. I console myself in the knowledge that all the best writers began in a garret.

Mary What can I do for you, Miss Susie?

Susie Oh don't let me stop you.

Mary goes back to scrubbing. **Susie** arranges the flowers.

Susie Stocks are not showy. I do hate showy flowers. What are you scrubbing at so viciously?

Mary Mr Pringle asked me to remove the stain, Miss.

Susie I can't see anything.

Mary Indian ink, he say.

Susie Really.

Mary He want the place spotless.

Susie Looks perfectly clean to me.

Mary So you can get on with your work.

Susie The light's so poor in here. Tell you what.

Susie *strides to the window and attacks the shutter fastening. She can't open it.*

Susie Would you be kind enough to....

Mary *struggles to her feet again. She easily undoes the shutters. Then goes back to scrubbing.*

Susie You've got the knack. *(beat)* Light is essential to enlightenment, as my father used to say. He was a vicar. It's the sort of thing they come out with. *(looking down)* It's like being perched at the top of a tree.

Susie *watches Mary for a moment. Then goes to the desk and takes out the notebook and pen. She arranges the chairs, pointing to one.*

Susie This one's for you.

Mary I beg your pardon?

Susie We have work to do.

Mary I have work to do, Miss Susie. It don't involve sitting on a chair.

Susie If you could just stop scrubbing for a moment.

Mary Mr Pringle particularly asked me to –

Susie Oh never mind him! They are all gone gallivanting to Brighton. Even Tilly and Cook have taken the day off. It's just you and me. Come and sit. Please.

Mary gets slowly to her feet. She perches on the edge of the chair.

Susie *(beat)* I've heard so much concerning you, Mary. Though we have not had occasion to really meet.

Mary I bring you tea each morning, Miss Susie.

Susie Of course. I didn't mean...*(beat)* Do you like it here?

Mary I like it very well. Very well.

Susie You've had such a position before?

Mary I've had a –

Susie You've seen many places, I suppose. My own travels have been rather limited I'm afraid. I'm from Suffolk, you see.

Mary I see.

Pause.

Susie You've had all sorts of adventures, from what I hear.

Mary Adventures?

Susie Your dramatic escape. Arriving desperate on the doorstep of the Anti-Slavery Society in the middle of the night. It's better than a romance.

Mary That is not exactly how it –

Susie What a terrible disappointment it must've been, finding the place full of old fossils. Mr Clarkson's about a hundred years old, and as for Mr Wilberforce! *Gradual mitigation of slavery in the dominions* blah blah blah. Still congratulating themselves on the abolition of the slave trade, twenty-five years ago. And at the centre of it all, our very own Mr Pringle.

Mary Mr Pringle is a good man.

Susie Of course. I am his greatest admirer.

Mary Give me a position in his own home.

Susie Mr Pringle's motives are excellent, and worthy. All the men are very... worthy. But don't you find them just a teeny bit boring? Admit it, Mary.

Mary *remains stony.*

Susie Not so the women. We never stop. We demand immediate emancipation! We write letters, petitions, we refuse sugar in our tea.

Mary Mr Pringle write a petition for me, Miss Susie, that go all the way to Parliament. There are many that benefit from his goodness. (*beat*) Mrs Pringle's sister Sybil for one.

Susie That old hag. I believe she hates me. You don't think she's here to stay, do you?

Mary And the Captain from South Africa, though he is a paying guest. A real gentleman. He say, Mary, how those legs today? Yes, Captain Moodie's as considerate as they come.

Susie Is he? I hadn't especially –

Mary That's without mentioning those that profit from Mr Pringle's learning.

Beat.

Susie If you mean to say -

Mary Yes, this house has been a blessing to me. The Lord had a purpose in delivering me here.

Beat.

Susie The Lord. I see.

Mary I am a good Christian, Miss Susie.

Susie I don't doubt it.

Mary I enjoy the privilege of attending church three times on a Sunday.

Susie Three times?

Mary I pray God to forgive my sins. Seems there are many. Me never knew how many till me went there.

Susie *suppresses a smile.*

Mary And the Reverend Mortimer helps me with -

Susie Mortimer! You must have noticed the odour? Such a strong smell of feet.

Mary (*laughs*) He has a way of leaning over me, just enough to get a good view of my you-know-whats!

Susie *stops laughing at once. A pause.*

Mary (*standing*) I'll be getting back to work, then.

Susie I believe you are right, Mary. God does have a purpose for you.

Mary stops.

Susie I think he intended to put us together like this.

Mary You do?

Susie Don't you see?

Beat. Mary sits back down.

Susie There is nothing so powerful as a personal story. Do you not agree?

Mary Well, I –

Susie Your story, Mary. Your life as a slave, your struggle for freedom. Do you believe it is your God-given mission - your solemn duty - to tell the people of England that story?

Beat. Mary gives nothing away.

Susie Here is your chance, Mary. I am the perfect person to help you.

Mary I beg your pardon?

Susie I am – I wish to be a writer, as you know. I long for it with all my heart. But I am willing to put that aside. I am prepared to become a humble scribe. A mere vessel.

Mary Vessel?

Susie You will say, slave narratives are two-a-penny these days. But this one will be different. Why? Because it will be by a woman. The first ever! What do you say, Mary?

A pause.

Mary I am not illiterate, Miss Susie.

Susie Of course not. I didn't mean –

Mary I've been studying. I have my letters.

Susie You do? I was led to believe –

Mary The majority of them.

Susie I see.

Pause.

Susie I understand it will be difficult. Given all you have endured. But just think, we could help put an end to slavery. And Mr Pringle would be so proud. It might even be a way of re-paying some of his kindness to you.

Mary *(beat)* I tell my life to you?

Susie That's it.

Mary And you write it down?

Susie Exactly.

Mary Then Mr Pringle publishes it?

Susie In a nutshell, yes.

Mary I don't think so.

Susie Sorry?

Mary We been through this already.

Susie Have we?

Mary With Mr Pringle. He said that telling my story would help my brothers and sisters in the West Indies.

Susie You mean you've already discussed it with –

Mary He said the Anti-Slavery Society would greatly benefit.

Susie That's just what I was –

Mary When I suggested the idea to him.

Susie *You* suggested –

Mary I thought it a good idea. But you know what, Miss Susie? I took some time. I weighed it up. I prayed to the Lord.

Susie Yes?

Mary And I changed my mind.

Mary *stands, goes back to look at the stain on the floor.*

Mary I don't think it gonna come out. That stain.

Susie Oh for heaven's sake, stop going on about the stain.

Mary You don't mind about the stain? All right. I'll get on with me work.

Mary takes out a duster and dusts, singing while she works.

Mary My massa keep me once, for true,
And gave me clothes and kisses,

Susie It makes no sense at all.

Mary Fine muslin coats, wid bitty too,
To gain my sweet embraces.

Susie What possible reason could she have to refuse?

Mary When pickinny him come black,
My massa starve and fum me,

Susie Tell me you'll re-consider, Mary.

Mary He tear the coat from off my back,
And naked he did strip me.

Susie turns away in frustration. She takes out the talcum, and sprays it across the room. She takes out a mirror, looks at herself.

Mary He turn me out into the field,
Wid hoe the ground to clear-O,

Susie It's not like I would have *changed* anything. The spelling certainly, the grammar. A little re-structuring.

Mary Me take pickinny on my back,

And work him te me weary-O.

Susie It's a question of emphasis. Keeping the good parts, cutting out the bad. If that's an adaptation, so be it. What is any story, after all, but an adaptation?

Mary *continues to hum, and dust.*

Susie Amanuensis. Sounds like a kind of flower. The colour of milk.

Susie *studies herself in the mirror.*

Mary *addresses the audience.*

Mary Would I have the good people of England know of the horrors of slavery? I fear you would not listen. The great God Wilberforce has bewitched you all. You talk only of endings. You have forgotten all else. *Mankind's conscience first to awake. In this country among countries!* You should ask yourself why your conscience slept so good these many years. Now you pretending like the West Indies got nothing to do with you. You have cut off the limb and set it loose from the motherland, while its children still hanging from your tits.

Will you make me remember? Remember and repeat, repeat, repeat until me suffering become like dust in me mouth? Am I to be exhibited, like the Hottentot Venus, for a view of my buttocks? You will cut open my body. For years to come you will be exposing me and feeding on my flesh.

II.

Susie *sits at the desk. She takes out the notebook and pen and writes.*

Mary *comes to see what she is doing.*

Susie Do you mind? I am trying to concentrate.

Mary You writing poetry, Miss Susie? I have great admiration for poetry. I should love to be able to pen lines, just like that.

Susie It's not just like that. Poetry doesn't obey the will.

Mary Perhaps you could read some to me? I would like that.

Susie I don't think it would be your sort of thing, Mary.

Beat.

Mary Mr Pringle tell me you are his protégé, whatever that is. Sound like an undergarment to me. What was it he say now? Young Susanna show great potential.

Susie *stops writing.*

Mary She have all the talent she needs.

Susie He said that?

Mary She just have to put in the work.

Susie Ugh. I do nothing but work.

Mary Maybe you trying too hard, Miss Susie. You is too desperate to step into your big sisters' shoes. From what I hear of them -

Susie What do you hear of them? What great writers they are, no doubt. Especially Agnes, with her Kings and Queens of England. Anyone who's anyone has read it.

Mary Come, with your fine verses, you will catch up with them in time.

Susie Forgive me, Mary, but what exactly qualifies a black slave to be the judge of poetry?

A silence.

Mary You're right. Scrubbing's about all I'm good for.

Mary *turns away, and picks up the pail.*

Mary Higher things are not for the likes of me.

Mary *goes to leave.*

She stops, with a thought. She turns.

Mary You were hoping to make your mark, through the telling of my story?

Susie Mary, how could you say such a thing? What must you think of me? It was for you, and you only. Surely you see that?

Mary *does not see that.*

Susie Mary. My dear. You should be aware that there are some, there are those, who treat people like you...

Mary Yes?

Susie Let me rephrase. You've been in this household such a short time. How could you possibly know that your life here is – I mean to say – your living is not...

Mary What are you saying, Miss Susie?

Susie It's hardly Mr Pringle's fault. He's just too generous. Last week, he bought a negro woman's freedom with eighty pounds from his own pocket!

Mary I don't catch your meaning, Miss Susie.

Susie There is always someone... new. Not that he means to treat people like projects, but we all know projects are begun in enthusiasm, and cast aside when they become...
(*beat*) But let us not dwell on gloomy matters. Have you seen the new book by John Knight, the Scotch slave? Everyone's buying it. He's become quite the star. I even saw Sybil reading it. Can't be doing any harm to his pocketbook, eh Mary? Not that commercial gain is the goal, quite the opposite. But making a name for oneself is bound to make one feel secure, don't you think? I daresay no-one would lay a finger on *him*, whatever the colour of his skin.

Mary What are you suggesting, Miss Susie?

Susie I'm not suggesting anything, only one hears such stories. These dreadful colonials, lugging their slaves in and out of England like so much baggage.

Mary 'Tis lucky then, that slaves be free on English soil.

Susie Thank the Lord. But surprising how many people fail to grasp a simple thing like habeus corpus. Remember poor Grace Jones in '22? Dragged back to Antigua. And that chap in Carlisle, what was his name?

Beat.

Susie It must be worrying. Especially after the letter.

Mary What letter?

Susie Didn't he tell you? It came yesterday. From that fellow, your owner. Mr White is it?

Mary Mr Wood! He send a letter? What did it say?

Susie Nothing important, as I recall. Mostly bluster about your conduct, back on the island. And some sort of argument over a pig.

Mary Huh?

Susie You were sent to prison for pig-stealing, I believe.

Mary That was not my doing. The saucy mulatta next door try to claim it was her pig. The Judge said I was right, so they had to free me. That's all there is to it.

Susie What happened to the pig?

Mary What you care so much about the pig for?

Susie If you must steal a live -

Mary I never stole anything in my life, how could you?

Beat.

Mary Sorry, Miss Susie. You got me worried now. Please tell me what else the letter say. He coming to claim me?

Susie Now let's not be over-dramatic. Don't give it another thought. *(beat)* I'm a little peckish. Would you be good enough to prepare luncheon, since Cook is not here. A full day off to go to the flower market. What possible use flowers could be to that steam engine of a woman I have no idea.

Susie *turns back to her writing.*

Mary *opens her mouth to speak, but the front door bell rings.*

Mary *goes to the window.*

Mary Who is that man?

Susie *comes over to look. She groans.*

Susie Oh, it's him. I'd better go down.

Mary What does he want?

Susie How would I know? Am I party to all of Mr Pringle's business? With Tilly away, I suppose it falls to me to get the door. Though I do hate lawyers.

Mary Lawyers! What he doing here?

Susie I have no idea. Come to think of it, the letter did mention... but it can't be that. Excuse me.

Mary Mr Wood must have sent him. Don't go down, Miss Susie. Please!

Mary tries to block Susie's way.

Susie Let me pass, Mary. I must answer the door.

Mary Miss Susie, listen. I was too hasty before. Let us re-consider. I'm ready to start with it. The story. I am ready to tell it.

She grabs Susie's arm.

Susie Changed your mind, have you? Very well, we'll set a day next week. Now let go of me.

Mary We must seize our chance, as you said. With them all away. Come, Miss Susie.

Mary grabs the notebook and pen and thrusts them at Susie.

Mary Where shall we start? What do you want to know? Shall I tell you what became of the pig?

Susie Oh, very funny. Out of my way.

Susie shakes herself free and goes to leave.

Mary *rushes back to the window.*

Mary Oh look at that, he's gone.

Mary and Susie *stare at each other.*

Susie I consider it very rude of you. This story of yours had better be good.

Susie *sits down.*

Susie Well? Come along, then. You were keen as mustard a moment ago.

Mary *(beat)* I was hoping you would tell me more about the letter, Miss Susie.

Susie *opens the notebook and gets the pen ready.*

Susie You surely don't expect me to commit everything I read to memory? It's nothing to worry about. Now let us begin, or we shall run out of time.

Mary Er... Where shall I start?

Susie I'm sure I don't know. It isn't my life we're talking about. Start at the beginning,

Mary Right.

Beat.

Susie Your place of birth perhaps?

Mary I was born in Bermuda.

Susie Whereabouts in Bermuda? It's important to be precise.

Mary The place is called Brackish Pond. I was born on a farm.

Susie Do you have a date?

Mary Eh?

Susie Your date of birth. Dates are good. They give it an air of truth.

Mary Begging your pardon but how do it need an air of truth when it is the truth?

Beat.

Susie Let us try something else. What about your parents?

Mary My mother was a household slave. We was owned by a Mr Williams.

Susie Did you have to work from a young age?

Mary I looked after Miss Betsy, Williams' granddaughter.

Susie (*writing*) Miss Betsy. Was she terribly cruel?

Mary Oh no! She made quite a pet of me. She used to lead me by the hand and call me her little nigger. I was very happy. (*beat*) I didn't know any better, did I?

Susie So... if you'd known you were a slave you wouldn't have been happy.

Mary I was too young to rightly understand my condition. I was well treated.

Susie So, slaves with good masters don't mind being slaves.

Mary That's not what I said. To be free is very sweet.

Susie Even when you are unaware of your chains? For all I know I might be a slave.

Mary Perhaps you didn't hear me, Miss Susie. I said, to be free is very sweet. (*beat*) And besides, every child have to grow up.

Susie We are all God's children. Surely we must believe that he knows what's best for us.

Mary I guess when the English arrive in the West Indies, they forgot about God.

Susie Shall I write that? It sounds rather good.

Mary I don't know.

Susie Should I even write that you were happy? It might not serve our purpose.

Mary If you think that's right. I'm afraid I can't think...

Susie It must be in your words, Mary.

Mary You are not letting me tell it in my words!

A silence.

Susie Your... carefree days must have come to an end.

Mary They did all right. On the auction block. When I was twelve years old.

Beat.

Susie Can you tell me a little more about that?

Mary We was all sold away. Me and my sisters.

Susie I see. Was it... very painful? Were you unhappy?

Mary Of course we was unhappy. What kind of a question is that?

Susie *(beat)* Can you recall any details?

Mary *thinks.*

Mary When our mother dress us that morning, she say, I am shrouding my children.

Susie Shrouding?

Mary What's wrong with it? You want me to change it?

Susie It's unusual, that's all.

Mary It's what she say, she didn't choose, she just said.

Susie *(beat)* Mary. When we write, we try to describe. To imagine ourselves there. Sights, sounds, thoughts, feelings. We must recreate. Entice the reader, make it attractive. Well, not attractive, in this case, but you see my point. As writers, we must paint a picture with words.

Mary For you everything can be done with words. A poor handful of sounds. A few scribbles on a page.

Beat.

Mary I was knocked down to the highest bidder at fifty-five pounds. You think it's too much? You'd have paid less for me?

Susie *(shocked)* How could you, Mary?

Mary You want more detail, is that it?

Mary *stands, as if on the auction block, addressing the audience.*

Mary They surround you and turn you and examine you. You is naked. You is on display. The crowd presses in on you. Your heart beats so hard you hold your hands over it; you push, push, but still it leaps from your chest. They talk lightly about your shape and size. They push their fingers into your mouth. They push them into your private parts. They handle you as a butcher handles a calf. You want to rise high, high above the street and know nothing more.

Susie *(moved)* I see. Mary, I -

Mary But you have not heard the best part. That was just the auction. I was bought by Captain Ingham and his wife. She liked to watch while he practised with the cow whip on my back. He liked to undress and stand in the bath. He bid me come wash him with the soap and cloth. Up and down. Up and down. I was still just a child.

This is too much for Susie. She puts down her pen. She stands and leaves the desk.

Mary Why do you not write, Miss Susie?

Susie *goes to the flowers in the vase. She buries her nose in them.*

III.

Mary Such pretty flowers. What did you say they was called?

Susie *does not reply. She fusses over the flowers.*

Mary They from Captain Moodie? *(beat)* Aha. I see what's been going on. I fancy we'll be hearing wedding bells before too long. Believe me, a married woman knows the signs.

Susie Wait. You're married? Why did you not tell me this before? Where is your husband?

Mary Antigua. And before you ask do I want to go to him, soon as I set foot on that island I become a slave again. What kind of choice is that?

Susie Dear Mary. I am so sorry. Is he a good man?

Mary There's few better.

Susie I thought you said you lived in Bermuda?

Mary I moved all over. After Ingham, there was Darrell, he was a –

Susie Wait, just a minute.

Susie goes back to her notebook.

Mary You wish to continue?

Susie I want nothing more than to continue. I simply need you to understand the need for... delicacy. That means we must be careful about what -

Mary I know what delicacy mean, Miss Susie.

Susie So we are in agreement?

Pause.

Mary After Ingham, there was Darrell. He sent me to Turk's Island, where I stood from morning 'til night in the ponds, gathering salt.

Susie puts down the pen.

Mary What now?

Susie I have an idea.

Susie *opens a drawer and takes out a bottle and two glasses.*

Susie A little something to oil the wheels.

Mary What's this? I can't drink this.

Susie Don't be stuffy, Mary. They are all out amusing themselves, why shouldn't we have a little fun?

Susie *pours and offers the glass. Mary reluctantly accepts.*

Susie Let us raise our glasses to... The History of Mary Prince.

Mary *kisses her teeth. They drink.*

Mary Where d'you pick up such habits?

Susie It's a vital part of a vicar's vocation. How else to win over all those grisly old ladies?

Mary *frowns.*

Susie Not you, silly. My father would have adored you. Let's face it, all the other men do.

Mary What do you mean by that, Miss Susie?

Susie Oh come on. Mr Pringle. Captain Moody. And as for Mr Wood!

Mary Tsk. That brute.

Susie *refills the glasses and drinks.*

Susie He's frightfully jealous, if his letter is anything to go by. Anyone would think he was in love with you. Of course, that's it! That's why he refused Mr Pringle's offer!

Mary What offer?

Susie To buy your freedom. Such a large sum it was too.

Mary Huh? When was this?

Susie Poor Mary. Always the last to know.

Mary He offered to... Mr Wood turned it down? So he will come!

Susie Of course he won't. He wouldn't dare.

Mary First the letter, then the lawyer... I tell you, Miss Susie, he is coming!

***Mary** dashes to shut the window, banging the shutters closed.
She tries to drag the desk towards the door to make a barricade.*

Susie What on earth are you doing?

Mary Help me with this!

Susie Calm down, Mary. We have laws in this country to protect people like you.

Mary I knew this would happen. I knew he wouldn't let me slip through his fingers.

***Mary** gives up with the desk and drags the chairs instead.*

Susie (*giggles*) There's no need to build a barricade, Mary. We're not expecting a revolution in Pentonville.

Mary You don't get it, do you? I am his *property*. When will you get that into your head?

Beat.

Susie There's no need to shout. For heaven's sake, leave the furniture alone.

Susie *goes to sit on the desk. She takes a big gulp of sherry.*

Susie I don't drink, you know.

Mary I can see that.

Susie I can't help but wonder. Are you sure you are not more to him than that?

Mary *(beat)* Miss Susie. The West Indies is different to here. Relations is different there.

Susie I see.

Mary Forgive me, but I doubt that you do. There's times when a woman don't have no choice. There's times when -

Susie Please don't feel you have to explain, Mary. Suffice it to say, we'd better not mention this sort of thing in our History. It is a simple tale of redemption. We need our readers to understand that -

Mary Who does?

Susie Who does what?

Mary Whose story is this, Miss Susie? You sit there, quibbling over my life, like we writing a shopping list. But I won't be packaged up like goods to be sold at the grocers. I've been sold three times already. I aint on the market anymore!

A silence.

The front door bell clangs, accompanied by loud knocking.

Mary It's him! Oh Lord, he is here!

Susie Of course it isn't him.

***Mary** runs to the window and opens the shutters. **Susie** follows. They look down.*

Mary It's him. It's Mr Wood. What am I to do?

***Mary** slams the shutters closed again.*

Susie Let's not panic. I will go and talk to him.

***Susie** turns to go but **Mary** grabs her.*

Susie Mary! Let me go.

Mary Under here. Quickly.

***Mary** pulls **Susie** towards the desk.*

Susie What are you doing? This is ridiculous –

More ringing and banging on the front door.

Mary Do as I say, Miss Susie, please.

***Mary** drags **Susie** under the desk, where they crouch.*

Susie What can he do? We won't let him -

Mary Shh!

*They listen. **Mary** grabs **Susie**'s hands and clutches them.*

Silence.

Susie Is he gone do you think?

Mary Shh!

They release each other, but stay together under the desk.

Susie Oh, my heart is beating fit to burst!

Mary And when he comes back? What then?

Susie We shall turn him away. Or hide again. We shall never give you up!

Mary It is not a laughing matter, Miss Susie.

Susie But he's so small and ugly. And those ginger whiskers. Doesn't he remind you of a pig? Just a little? They are his favourite subject after all.

Susie *thrusts out her chin out and snorts.*

Susie She stole it, your honour! She snatched that poor pig from the arms of its loving mistress!

Mary Should've seen the other woman. She got what was coming to her.

Susie You are very wicked.

Mary Hm. Has anyone complained of me?

Susie Not everyone has fallen under your spell. Tilly the maid, for instance.

Mary That little bisom. Since the day I arrive in this house nothing is her fault.

Susie *(taking off Tilly)* I never had nothing to do with it. It was Black Mary what broke the dish, I swear it was!

Mary Do Sybil. What was it she come out with the other day, about Mr Pringle?

Susie You mean: I have been trying all my life to love Scotchmen but I am obliged to desist from the experiment in despair.

They laugh.

Mary She have a mouthful of lemons, all right. What about Cook, the way she huff and puff?

Susie ‘Phuh! She would not touch my scones – phuh – though they were made fresh – phuh – but three weeks ago!’

Mary Hah hah! Makes more steam than Mr Stephenson’s rocket, does Cook. Do Mr Pringle for me.

Susie I can't, I mustn't.

Mary Captain Moodie then. That deep, manly voice he have.

Susie *(giggles)* Absolutely not.

Mary I seen you looking at him. Aint no crime. He’s an upright sort for sure. Stiff in all the right places.

Susie Mary!

Susie *grabs Mary's hands on impulse. They smile at each other. Susie inspects Mary's hands.*

Mary You never touched a black person before?

Susie *lets go quick and draws back.*

Mary It's all right.

Mary *retakes Susie's hands. A silence.*

Mary They is all curious. I'm used to it.

Mary, *anticipating, places Susie's hand on her hair.*

Susie It feels like....

Mary Hair.

Pause.

Susie Are you not curious too?

Mary About white folks? *(laughs)*

Susie Silly of me. You must know so much.

Mary More than I ever wanted to. But I look on you as a friend, Miss Susie.

Susie I can be judgemental and rash. I have so many faults.

Mary You will make a fine wife for the Captain. Now there's a wedding I will not miss. I shall buy a new suit for the occasion. And ride upon the coach box.

Susie What a picture we will make! *(beat)* Unless of course...

Mary What?

Susie I shan't marry him, Mary, if he stops me writing. There's nothing I've ever wanted more. *(beat)* How do you know if you're in love, Mary?

Mary Feels sweet. Like sunshine. Tastes good, like ripe mango. You ever had mango, Miss Susie?

Susie *shakes her head.*

Mary Mm – mm. Use to get ourselves near killed for a little bit of that sweetness. Creep in the garden, up the tree, stuffing your mouth - juice roll down your chin, strings sticking in your teeth – you gotta keep your mouth shut on them strings. When Massa shout: You working in the kitchen? *(through clamped teeth)* Yes Massa! You been in my garden? No Massa. He find you, there be trouble all right. Yes. Nothing like that sweetness. Well, almost nothing.

Susie What kind of trouble?

Mary Oh, you know. Men have their ways.

A pause.

Susie I know so little of men.

Mary Less you know the better.

Susie I thought that since you have... I wish to know what it's like when a man... how does it feel when a man...

Mary *chuckles, a dirty laugh.* **Susie** *is embarrassed.*

Mary Sorry, Miss Susie. What did you want to ask?

Susie You wouldn't understand.

Mary I wouldn't understand? Do you know who you're talking to?

Susie Captain Moodie has already kissed me.

Mary Feels good, don't it? Here (*touches her own mouth*) and here (*touches her breasts*) and maybe here (*touches her sex*). Soon, be more than just kisses you want. You start looking at men in a different way. All kinds of men. You won't never look at old Mr Pringle the same way again!

Susie *gasps and jumps up.*

Susie How could you? You dirty everything!

Mary Don't take it so serious, Miss Susie. I was jesting.

Susie You have no regard for anything. No true feelings. That's the trouble with you people, you don't feel anything.

Mary Come now, you don't mean that.

Susie I see now what you are! Why did I think I could trust you?

Susie *strides about the room.*

Mary Pay no heed to it. Let us get on with our work. It's getting late. The others will be returning soon.

Mary *takes the notebook and presses it on Susie, who pushes it away.*

Susie Get away from me. I need some air.

She goes to the window and tries the shutters. Mary comes to help.

Susie I can do it!

*She pushes **Mary** away. But she still can't do it.*

Susie Can you undo it for me, please.

***Mary** opens the shutters and then the window.*

***Susie** takes some breaths of air.*

Mary Miss Susie, please listen to me –

Susie Just leave me alone!

***Mary** walks away. She picks up the bottle of talcum and tips it over her head, rubbing it into her face. She sings:*

Mary Obisha, him de come one night,
And give me gown and busses,
Him get one pickinny, white!
Almost as white as missus.

Then Missus lick me with long switch,
And say his da the Massa,
The massa curse her, lying bitch,
And tell her 'buss my rassa!'

Me flogged when me no take him,
Me flogged too if me do it,
Me no have no-one for my friend,
So me am forced to do it.

Me know no law, me know no sin,
Me is just what ebba them make me,
This is the way dem bring me in,
So God nor devil take me!

IV.

Susie How do I know whether anything you have told me is true?

Susie *opens a drawer, grabbing a bundle of papers and brandishing them.*

Susie Look at these! Reports, letters, all of them contesting your story. The honourable Mr Byam, of Antigua. The doctor who treated you. The Friends of the Negro in Birmingham, asking for proof. No-one will believe you, don't you see? It's your word against theirs. How foolish I will look! Duped by a common slave. Lending my pitying ear to her lies. It's embarrassing. It's more than that, I feel ashamed. A hot kind of shame.

Mary Shame? Don't talk to me about shame. Shame my best friend, he climb into bed with me every night. If you think I'm gonna let shame stop me doing this, you're mistaken.

Susie I cannot do this. I release you from our arrangement.

Mary Where does that leave me, Miss Susie? Didn't you say you wanted to help me? That my story needed to be told? You suddenly lose your appetite for helping the poor and unfortunate?

Susie I felt sorry for you.

Mary You liked me better as a victim.

Susie You never liked *me* at all! You used me. Every relation you have is one of manipulation and advantage. All those men - nothing more than transactions. You are no better than a common whore.

Mary Whore, demon, hussy, I been called them all. Is it our fault they prefer us to you, our flesh tastes sweeter, we get them going?

Susie Like a bitch on heat!

Mary You white women are all the same. Scratch the surface and underneath is the same green-eyed monster. But we have our ways to get back. They trust us with their most precious things. Those poor pickannies. Many's the one has succumbed. So sickly they are.

Susie You wouldn't! Innocent children, you couldn't!

Mary Why wouldn't I? When they take everything, when they strip us to the bone?

***Susie** slaps **Mary** in the face.*

Susie It's what you're used to, isn't it? It's what you want.

***Mary** slaps her back.*

Mary Didn't think I would, did you?

***Susie** goes for **Mary** again, but **Mary** grabs her arms and pins them at her sides. They stare at each other.*

Mary Listen to me. I was twelve years old when the first one jump on me. He push his thing inside me and he say – you like this? You better get used to it because this is what every man gonna do to you. Every Bukra, every coloured, every nigger, gonna fuck you till your cunt is bloody and filled up with pox. They'll strip you and beat you and trample on you like an animal but they'll still want you. They will always want you.

Beat.

Mary You want proof? I'll give you proof.

***Mary** stands centre-stage. She begins to untie her apron.*

Susie What are you doing?

Mary I didn't choose to do this. Remember that.

She takes off her apron and unbuttons her sleeve cuffs.

Susie Mary, stop this at once.

Mary *yanks up her sleeves. She shows her left arm.*

Mary Here is the place where Mrs Darrell liked to put the pans when she took them from the fire.

Susie I said stop.

She shows her right arm.

Mary Here are the scars from the cow-whip where Ingham missed his mark upon my shoulder.

Susie You have made your point.

Mary *lifts up her skirt.*

Mary These are from the salt pans on Turk's Island, where the maggots ate into my legs.

Susie Ugh! I have seen quite enough.

Mary But why stop there, Miss Susie? Why not see the rest of me? Why not get a good look at my arse, since it is here that much of the traffic passed. And what about here? (*grabs her tummy*) where I received the blows that made sure I would never bring children into this world?

Susie Please, I believe you. It's the others. I meant the others.

Mary Why not invite them all to come in? Mrs Pringle and her sister Sybil, all the good ladies of London. Why should they miss the show? What is this body after all but something to entertain them? Don't look so sad, Miss Susie, how many times have you told me you have such sympathy for me?

Susie I do not deserve this, Mary.

Mary But you have not seen the best part. It is my back that took the main force of the blows.

*Mary pulls down her dress and shows **Susie** her back (not the audience).*

Mary Take a good look. Why don't you touch it, Miss Susie? You cannot touch me? Do I disgust you so much?

***Mary** forces **Susie** to touch her. **Susie** staggers and falls to the floor.*

***Mary** pulls her dress back up.*

A silence.

Mary You wish me to be strong. If I am not strong, the world does not sit right. But I am weary of it.

***Susie** stares at the floor.*

Susie I do believe I see it now.

Mary They have crushed me and discarded me. Who will care for me now?

Susie Indian ink. Such an ugly stain. We must get someone to see to it.

A long pause.

Mary *picks up the pen and notebook. She offers them to Susie.*

Susie What are you doing?

Mary We still have a few hours, before the others come back.

Susie You're not serious. You can't be.

Mary You have a commission, remember.

Susie We'll have to begin all over again. I've nothing of use here.

Mary It won't take long. My life does not amount to much.

Susie How can I do it, knowing what I know?

Mary Think about it. We have already written the story. All that remains is to put it on the page. We will take out the unsuitable parts.

Susie There won't be much left.

Mary Your name will be on it too. I will make sure of that.

Susie Do you think I care for that now?

Mary Come, open your book. Read me what you have.

Susie *opens the notebook and reads.*

Susie I was born at Brackish Pond, in Bermuda, on a farm. My mother was a - *(she breaks off)*

Mary Carry on, Miss Susie.

Susie Do you think they will listen?

Mary I will shout it in their faces. I will shout it to all of England if I have to.

Mary *addresses the audience.*

Mary Do you doubt me? Audiences are not difficult to please. When I spill the contents of my heart, you will pay me some attention. When I pick away at the seams of the past, for a time, you will believe me. When I point my finger at your sons, your husbands, your mothers and your grandmothers, there will be one passing moment when you will listen.

It is but a small matter of emphasis, and of adaptation. What is any story after all but an adaptation?

3.3 *Glorious Causes*: Robert Wedderburn and his world

*'Folklore's cultural guerrilla resistance against the market economy.'*⁴²

Sylvia Wynter, the Caribbean writer and cultural theorist, wrote the above in 1970, in her article exploring the socio-cultural impacts of the Jamaican ritual Jonkonnu. Wynter was referring to the effect of the meshing of performance conventions and the inclusion of festival rituals in drama, in a post-colonial context. This junction, or crossover between differing theatrical forms constitutes a useful descriptor for the form and content of the play *Glorious Causes*. Robert Wedderburn lived through a period when political, social and cultural discourses were often enacted through theatrical forms, both inside and outside the playhouse. Wedderburn and his colleagues espoused radical dissension against slavery and class oppression, expressing their 'guerrilla resistance' through encouraging active rebellion and in some cases, promoting outright revolution.⁴³ The modalities of the second play in the trilogy interweave the English style of satirical ballad opera, epitomised by the eighteenth century *Beggar's Opera*, with traditional folk music cadences and the de-stabilising, meta-theatrical mode of the carnivalesque.⁴⁴ The play is also peppered with nursery rhymes and apparently nonsensical ditties, mostly sung or spoken by the one-legged war-veteran beggar character, Billy Waters. His role as the Shakespearean fool provides a light-hearted but often revealing commentary on the action and characters of the play.

English folk song, according to the musician and collector Cecil Sharp, can be defined as reflecting 'feelings and tastes that are communal rather than personal. [...] Its creation is never completed – while at every moment of its history it exists not in one form but in many.'⁴⁵ One of folk's chief proponents, the musician Ewan MacColl, adds to those properties the following: 'A folk song is a song written in the idiom of popular speech, the melody of which is a development of what the voice normally does in speech. It is current among the common people and reflects exactly their attitude to life, their dreams and aspirations, their fears and, above all, their hopes.'⁴⁶ The folk idiom – music and lyrics – as well as the pantomimic cadences of nursery rhymes, and the influence of the ballad opera, make up the generic backbone to the play *Glorious Causes*, but it is the conjunction of these conventions with the tropes of

⁴² Wynter, 36.

⁴³ The play features the Cato Street Conspiracy. See 2.1. See also M. J. Trow, *Enemies of the State: the Cato Street Conspiracy* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2010); John Stanhope, *The Cato Street Conspiracy* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1962); and Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree*, pp. 298-320.

⁴⁴ John Gay's 1728 *Beggar's Opera* is often described as the first musical, mixing dancing and popular songs with spoken-word drama. Set in and around London's Newgate Prison, it features the criminal 'underworld' whilst also satirising Walpole's government, whose corruption was an open secret. It was a sensation, enjoying a record run, and has influenced stage musical works into the 20th century, most notably Brecht and Weill's *The Threepenny Opera*.

⁴⁵ Sharp quoted in Jean R. Freedman, 'What Is a Folk Song?' in *Peggy Seeger: A Life of Music, Love, and Politics* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 133–143 (p. 133).

⁴⁶ MacColl quoted in *Ibid*, p. 133.

the carnivalesque dramatic mode, from a post-colonial perspective, that constitutes the key investigation of this part of this chapter.

The appropriation and transformation of received, Euro-centric forms of drama in post-colonial contexts, as Gilbert and Tompkins maintain, ‘stretches colonial definitions of theatre to assert the validity (and the vitality) of other modes of representation.’⁴⁷ Incorporating these ‘other’, post-colonial, or pre-colonial forms results in a theatrical practice in which the community and social order are given prominence. This communitarian constitution reflects both the nature of the setting of *Glorious Causes*, and the characters in that setting. Not only does it mirror the varied backgrounds of the people Wedderburn was surrounded by, but also the essence of his radical philosophy. The carnivalesque as a form of appropriation or transformation presents a suitable mode for post-colonial representations of the body politic that ‘seek to dismantle the hierarchised corpus of imperial culture’; just as carnival itself is a medium of the ‘multi-voiced or polyphonic spirit which effectively opposes mono-logic orders such as colonialism.’⁴⁸ Its use for dramatic representation of Wedderburn and his fellow radicals’ eccentric, parodic philosophy accords with a Bakhtinian paradigm that enacts a ‘gay relativity’ via regenerative laughter associated with images of bodily life, presented through parody, caricature, and other comic gestures.⁴⁹ Wedderburn and his circle deconstructed colonial discourse through the polyphonic voices of the ultra-radicals, performed to an audience comprised of the impoverished, multifarious residents of the London slum, St Giles.

Caribbean carnival, as manifested principally through a Trinidadian incarnation, provides the bedrock of carnivalesque modalities enacted in post-colonial Caribbean theatre. As Gilbert and Tompkins explain, carnival was appropriated by the Black lower classes to become a vehicle for rebellion against colonial authority. It ‘represented more than a licensed inversion of accepted norms; it embodied an ongoing struggle against inequity and oppression.’ This spirit of protest, they continue, was evident in the traditional calypso lyrics and the various masquerades, which satirised white society.⁵⁰ Since the foundational playwright Errol Hill wrote his *Mandate for a National Theatre* in Trinidad, which declared that ‘substantial material exists in the Trinidad Carnival, past and present, for the creation of a unique form of theatre – a theatre in which music, song, mime, dance, and speech are fully integrated and exploited’, the carnival presence in post-colonial drama has been understood as a syncretising element, that incorporates many elements of the colonising culture even while expressing difference and /or dissent from them.⁵¹ Gilbert and Tompkins summarise the characteristics of this drama as:

⁴⁷ Gilbert and Tompkins, p. 54.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 83.

⁴⁹ Bakhtin, p. 39-40.

⁵⁰ Gilbert and Tompkins, p. 80.

⁵¹ Errol Hill, *The Trinidad Carnival: Mandate for a National Theatre* (Austin: Texas University Press, 1972), p. 110.

Characteristically exuberant, non-naturalistic and self-consciously theatrical, drama based on festival enactments calls attention to public space, communal activity, and vernacular languages. Its subjects are positioned within a distinctive local history, thereby foregrounding the various cultural influences at play. Like ritual drama, festival drama also works towards revitalising the folk culture.⁵²

The carnivalesque modes adopted in *Glorious Causes* contribute to the folkloric, communitarian nature of the play's structure as well as its setting, imagery, characters and diegesis in a number of different ways. Removing naturalistic frameworks encourages examination of the structural and thematic links between the various performative levels experienced by the audience. As Gilbert and Tompkins state, this shunning of realism revels in 'the magic of artifice, always pushing against the limits of the imagination. Like ritual theatre, it aims to transform the ways in which 'reality' itself can be conceptualised.'⁵³ In spatial terms, the stage is continually appropriated and usurped for different purposes and locations: it is simultaneously a theatre, a chapel, a jail, a place of execution. This unsettles topographical boundaries whilst questioning ownership of the space. Gilbert and Tompkins assert that: 'Conceptual, spatial, [and] temporal alterations reposition the original action so that the audience must continually re-evaluate their understanding of both the ritual and its dramatic function.'⁵⁴ This heterotopian site, capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several other spaces, becomes 'a desecralised space that admits fluid and informal interface between all participants.'⁵⁵

The 'Pierrot' character of Trinidadian carnival is a 'low-born' jester, who speaks the vernacular of the underprivileged and depends solely on his wits to survive. He entertains the audience with topical commentary, satire and burlesque, inventing 'word-destruction exercises as a parody of grandiloquence.'⁵⁶ Oral performativity is interpreted through this prism in *Glorious Causes*, through the characters of Wedderburn, the 'Black Dwarf' Samuel Waddington, and the whore, Bruising Bet. These characters' exploitation of the dramatic qualities of language is employed to challenge dominant discourses of colonialism and slavery in the Metropole. The tropes of Pierrot's behaviour and attitude to authority are eminently comparable to those of Wedderburn, both in life and in the play. The jester's 'characteristic ambivalence towards imposed language and education systems'⁵⁷ reflects Wedderburn's own rejection of literacy, explored extensively in Chapter Two. Carnival language such as that uttered by Pierrot, as Gilbert and Tompkins emphasise, is 'marked by its insistent exploitation of all the resources developed by an oral culture.'⁵⁸ Carnival characters prove immensely useful in dramatizing

⁵² Gilbert and Tompkins, p. 78.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 87.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 71.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 84.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 81.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 85.

the ironies inherent in Wedderburn's competing and sometimes contradictory oral performances, which on the one hand re-produced and on the other traduced Anglo-imperialist scribal traditions.⁵⁹

The use of meta-theatre – the play within a play, *Inkle and Yarico* – also offers an important framework through which to interrogate received models of performance. This eighteenth-century trans-racial love story was widely interpreted by numerous playwrights on the London stage during the abolition period.⁶⁰ As discussed in the main introduction, such contemporary plays featuring anti-slavery themes or characters were often essentially conservative, reproducing the hierarchies of slavery, race and gender whilst reinforcing narratives of British colonial and moral superiority. The incorporation of *Inkle and Yarico* into the storytelling as a production in rehearsal lays bare the categorising nature of the racialised colonial discourse the play itself claimed to confront and challenge. Meta-theatrical elements are also present through another theatrical trope in *Glorious Causes*: the use of direct address. The constant interplay with the audience introduces a dialogic aspect that draws attention to both the text's and the players' reflexivity, conducting an effective commentary that makes use of continuously shifting perspectives to critique and destabilise fixed categories of race and gender. At the same time the breaking of the fourth wall insists on active re-evaluations of how past historical discourses feed into contemporary socio-cultural perceptions. This meta-textuality is augmented by the fluid character of the physical space. The figures and features of the carnivalesque mode act to dissolve the usual demarcations between performer and audience, public and private space, thus implicating the audience as well as democratising the theatrical space wherever possible, in another reflection of the motifs of the play.

The use of masks also offers an opportunity for questioning established forms of authority. Masks have been worn as part of carnival to maintain anonymity, perform character and fantasy, and also to express ritual elements. Dennis Scott's 1974 play *An Echo in the Bone* is a psychological study of oppression and rebellion, spanning a two-hundred year sweep of the Afro-Caribbean slavery experience, and based around Nine Night, a spirit-possession ritual common throughout the Caribbean.⁶¹ Scott's play features both black and white characters but specifies that the actors should be Black. Their use of white masks reconstructs the colonised body as a site of resistance that threatens to loosen institutionalised authority's fixed hold on representation. In *Glorious Causes* the white authority figures are parodied by masked Black actors. This renders their representation particularly symbolic, since it highlights the racialised gap between signifier and signified, thus diminishing the authority of the white figures.

⁵⁹ See 2.2.

⁶⁰ See 0.2.

⁶¹ Dennis Scott, *An Echo in the Bone*, in *Plays for Today*, ed. by Errol Hill (London: Hodder Education, 2015). See also Stone, *Studies in West Indian Literature*, p. 147-8.

To conclude, the carnivalesque mode as a contributing paradigm to the enmeshing of dramatic conventions was germane to the conception and realisation of the script of *Glorious Causes*. The carnivalesque as a subversion that undermines virtually all categories of social privilege becomes particularly apposite to a scenario that aims to challenge and satirise narratives of domination in the interplay between colony and Metropole. Foregrounding the parodic tenor that Robert Wedderburn's performative voice so effectively embodied has proved vital to this attempt to interpret how he sought to undercut understandings of hegemonic political and cultural discourses of power.

Glorious Causes
by Mags Chalcraft-Islam

Characters (*minimum 10 actors*)

Samuel Waddington	<i>a black dwarf</i>
Bruising Bet	<i>a black prostitute, former bare-knuckle fighter</i>
Billy Waters	<i>a black violin-playing beggar with a wooden leg</i>
Patty	<i>a white woman</i>
Will Bonus	<i>a white carpenter</i>
Robert Wedderburn (50s)	<i>a Jamaican mixed-race radical preacher</i>
Elizabeth Wedderburn (Eliza)	<i>his younger half-sister, also mixed heritage</i>
Arthur Thistlewood ('T')	<i>a white farmer</i>
William 'Black' Davidson	<i>a Jamaican mixed-race ex-army man</i>
George Colman	<i>a white playwright</i>
Viscount Castlereagh	<i>a white politician</i>
William Wilberforce	<i>a white politician</i>

Castlereagh and Wilberforce can double with Colman and Thistlewood in any combination

Act I

Scene 1

BET, WADDINGTON *and* BILLY (*the* NARRATORS).

ALL 3 Hark, hark, the dogs do bark,
 The beggars are coming to town,
 Some in rags and some in tags,
 And some in silken gowns.

WADDINGTON Ladies and Gentleman, welcome to the rookery. A stinking soup of a slum, stretching from Seven Dials to Snow Hill, Cock Street to Thieving Lane.

BET Home of the gin shop, haunt of the plague. Haven to punks and prostitutes, bucks and bum-bailiffs.

WADDINGTON Yes my friends, you have plunged into the arsehole of London.

BET Camden.

ALL Some gave them white bread,
And some gave them brown,
Some gave them a good horse-whip,
And sent them out of town.

BILLY whips out a cap.

BILLY Spare a few pennies for a poor Negro boy!

WADDINGTON Billy, stop that at once! What will these people think of us?

BET They aint got no pennies for the likes of you.

BILLY A bit of the folding stuff then?

WADDINGTON Allow me to apologise, ladies and gents. This veteran seaman you see before you is Billy Waters, a poor victim.

BET Gave his leg to the Empire, and what did she give him in return? A permanent position on the streets.

WADDINGTON Alas, a man of colour discharged from the English navy is lower than the shit on your shoe.

BILLY Least I'm not a dwarf.

WADDINGTON Lost his wits as well as his leg. Let me introduce myself. Samuel Waddington, at your service. Singer, satirist, and -

BET Sex pest. Never mind him. Bruising Bet is the name. Prize-winning wrestler.

WADDINGTON Now reduced to selling her body on the streets.

BET Aint my fault no-one wants to see a bare-knuckle fight no more. They wanna pay me to whip their white arses instead, that's fine by me.

WADDINGTON You should make an appointment. You'd be in good company.

BET The cabinet, mainly.

BILLY I once embraced the word of God and shunned the bawdy house,
No more to dip my pizzle at St Giles and thereabouts,
Then Bruising Bet came into view, I cried out girl I loves you,
And for to prove what I have said, this night I'll soundly fuck you!

BET Shove it up your arse, Billy.

WADDINGTON So why, you are asking yourself, are we here? Why trouble the smooth surface of your sanitised century?

BET Because we are you.

WADDINGTON We're so deep in your blood you forgot to disown us.

BET We are your past.

BILLY Back to bite you on the bum.

BET Get ready for a few things you didn't learn in school.

WADDINGTON Think life is weird now? Try being a late Georgian.

BET Think you live in turbulent times? Welcome to the brightest, darkest, sexiest era of them all.

WADDINGTON We don't just have war and starvation, upheaval and repression,

BET We got conspiracy and treason, horror and spectacle,

BILLY Pestilence and pus.

WADDINGTON But don't be alarmed, my dear dandies and dandyettes. We are here to entertain you. This is a theatre, after all.

BET A playhouse! All life is here. Drama and dancing, fighting and thieving, sexing and screaming.

WADDINGTON And that's just the audience.

BET Rope-dancing, wire-walking, giants and freaks!

BILLY Rat-fighting, bear-baiting, elephants versus tigers!

WADDINGTON Hold on, me ducks. They're a classy lot. We need something high-brow. How about we show them Inkle and Yarico, the famous tale of forbidden love between black and white? The great play of the age, my lads and lasses. Issuing from the pen of none other than George Colman the Younger, giant of our times.

COLMAN enters, followed by PATTY and WILL BONUS, wheeling on a palm tree.

COLMAN Come on, put your backs into it.

PATTY We're trying.

BONUS It's heavy.

WADDINGTON Colman is working on a new version of the play. A veritable exposé of the evils of slavery.

COLMAN Stop! A little to the right.

WADDINGTON To fit with the times.

BET Now that the slave trade has been banned for, let me see, twelve whole years.

COLMAN Left a bit. A bit more. There. Hm. Yes. That will do. Carry on!

He exits.

BONUS See that? Not a word about the craftsmanship. Not a bloody word.

BET William Bonus, ladies and gents. Will to his friends, if he had any. Artisan carpenter, fallen on hard times.

BONUS Arrogant puff.* He writes one good play.

PATTY Come on, Will, it's a cracking story, you've gotta admit.

BET His girlfriend, Patty.

PATTY English merchant shipwrecked on foreign shore, saved by beautiful savage.

BET General dogsbody. Dreams of going on the stage. We all know it's never gonna happen.

**Pronounced as in powder puff*

BILLY Pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake, baker's man, bake me a cake as fast as you can.

PATTY They fall in love. What could be more romantic than that?

BILLY Pat it and prick it and mark it with B, and put it in the oven for baby and me.

WADDINGTON Surely the best part is when he sells her?

BET While she's pregnant with his child.

BONUS Excuse me - !

BET Inkle turns out to be a bit of an arse.

PATTY D'you mind? We've got a set to put up.

BET Haven't we had enough of Inkle and bloody Yarico?

WADDINGTON I suppose we could do something a bit more exciting.

BILLY How about some criminal wickedness? Hideous perversion?

BET What do you say to violent conspiracy? A murderous plot to overthrow the government and take over the country. Would that be a story worth telling?

A loud roar, off. ROBERT WEDDERBURN charges in, brandishing a stick.

WEDDERBURN AAAAaarrgggh! Thieves! Whipjacks! I'll have you! I'll flay you alive!

He thrashes about him. PATTY and WILL cower.

BET That's more like it. Notorious firebrand Robert Wedderburn, the Black Prince. Radical colonial, and proper shit-stirrer.

WEDDERBURN Bawdy-baskets! Lying harum-scarums! Caught you in the act this time!

ELIZA enters, carrying banners.

ELIZA What's going on, Robert?

WADDINGTON His half-sister, Miss Elizabeth Wedderburn. Lately joined us from Jamaica.

WEDDERBURN 'Tis those intruders again, Eliza. After the benches.

ELIZA They've already had the benches, Robert.

WEDDERBURN You'll get nothing more, you scrofulous malefactors! Out of my chapel!

BONUS Chapel?

WADDINGTON We're your audience, Wedderburn.

BET Put that thing down.

ELIZA How rude of us. How do you do? Delighted to meet you.

PATTY Very nice, I'm sure.

ELIZA Is this your tree?

BONUS Don't touch it. It's fragile.

WEDDERBURN Not Methodists are you? I won't have Methodists. Or Presbyterians. Or Millenarians. Or Necessarians for that matter. I won't have Shakers, Quakers, Dunkers or Jumpers.

BONUS No, we aint -

WEDDERBURN Universalists? Materialists, Destructionists? Hutchinsonians,
Mugletonians?

ELIZA Now Robert –

WEDDERBURN Swedenborgian? Baxterian? Lapsarian? Vegetarian?

PATTY We aint none of them.

BONUS We're Moravians. Suppose you don't hold with them either?

WEDDERBURN Moravians? What's wrong with 'em?

BONUS Nothing -

WEDDERBURN So what you on about, lad? I'll have you know, we run a broad church
here.

PATTY Don't look like any church I know.

ELIZA Everyone's welcome. Do sit down. Help yourselves to some
refreshment.

*She points to some hay bales and bottles of beer. She goes to hang up banners.
They read:*

EXHUBERANCE IS BEAUTY
LIBERTY OR DEATH
UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE AND ANNUAL PARLIAMENTS
KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

BONUS *grabs* PATTY's arm.

PATTY Leave off, Will.

BONUS What about Colman? He'll kill us.

PATTY Sod him. I wanna have some fun.

They drag out the hay bales and arrange the chapel.

WADDINGTON I know what you're thinking. A church? But these are the times. How else to gather in this age of surveillance and repression? The army are on the streets.

BET The mood is ugly, what with the corn laws and the French wars.

BILLY A mutton-shunter on every corner and a spy under every bed.

WADDINGTON The mad King is on his deathbed and the Prince Regent is a bloated macaroni.

BET The people have had enough.

WADDINGTON This little hayloft in Soho is where it all began. The bloodiest conspiracy you've never heard of. A deadly plot that was born in hope and ended with the last public beheading on British soil. Shall we begin?

The others have sat down, waiting for WEDDERBURN'S sermon to start.

BET Let's have a tune, Billy! Something with class!

BILLY plays and they sing:

Rule Britannia! Britannia rules the waves. Britons never never never will be slaves.

Scene 2
- *continuous* -

WEDDERBURN Be it known to the world! Be it spread amongst the poor and oppressed! You see before you the offspring of an African. My grandmother was a slave. My mother was a slave. She was raped. Yes, raped. I will not pretend otherwise.

ELIZA Our father owned a substantial plantation in Jamaica.

WEDDERBURN A rich man, a cruel man, a man who took what he wanted and tossed the rest aside. Yes, the same proud monsters who rule here in England can be found all over the world, stealing and violating the rights of men and women.

BET Amen to that!

WEDDERBURN But surely, you cry, by the grace of Saint Wilberforce and his tea-drinking compatriots, the trade in humans has ceased forever? It is not so! Slavery is alive and well, my friends! Wilberfanny has gone back to his drawing room to bask in his saintliness while our brothers and sisters still toil under the whip in the colonies. Wedderburn declares, it is time for this hell to end! Wedderburn demands immediate emancipation!

BONUS Never mind the blacks. What about the whites?

Beat.

BONUS We're no better off than the negroes. Many of us would be happy to live under a tropical sun. Many of us would be glad of a day off a week, and food and drink in plenty. Just 'cause our skin aint black, doesn't mean we don't suffer. Just because our chains aint visible, don't mean they aint there.

WEDDERBURN Believe me, brother, I see your chains. But you wear them of your own free will, do you not? Your kind were born to be slaves. Aint that so?

Tense silence. Then WEDDERBURN laughs.

WEDDERBURN Look at yourself, my friend. Why prate on our differences? Why sow division when we all fight for the same cause? You English are slaves to your meagre wage; you are imprisoned too. In the fields, in the mills. Down the mines! Who is keeping you there? Is it the blacks? Unity, my friend. Freedom for all. Have you not read the Rights of Man?

BILLY Far and wide we praise his name, Glory Be to Thomas Paine.

BONUS This is just speechifying. What are you going to do about it? We're hungry. Are you going to feed us, with all your words?

WADDINGTON A bold question.

WEDDERBURN Did I take the bread from your mouth? Did I tax you until you bled? Did I pursue the French to Wateryloo? You are hungry. We are all hungry. Instead of turning on each other, we should ask ourselves, what are those plague-sores in government doing about it?

THISTLEWOOD and BLACK DAVIDSON enter.

THISTLEWOOD Did I hear you say government? I shit on this government. What has this government ever done but tighten the noose around our necks? I say death to this government!

WADDINGTON Arthur Thistlewood, ladies and gents. T to you and me. Once a prosperous farmer. Now, you've guessed it,

BET Fallen on hard times. And this is William Davidson. Nickname Black. Recently discharged from the army.

BILLY Two of our resident choirboys.

DAVIDSON Long as you don't ask us to sing. Ladies.

DAVIDSON *bows low and winks. He makes a show of kissing ELIZA'S hand.*

ELIZA Mr Davidson's father is the Jamaican attorney general.

THISTLEWOOD For all the good it does him. Still wallowing in the gutter with the rest of us.

BET His father sent him away.

DAVIDSON For an English education, naturally.

THISTLEWOOD Pops couldn't stand the sight of his mongrel hide. Like all nobs, likes to keep his sins out of the light of day.

DAVIDSON Perhaps you should challenge him to a duel, T.

WADDINGTON T here challenged the Home Secretary to a duel, and when he refused, sent him the bill for his pistols and coat.

PATTY Did old Sidmouth pay up?

THISTLEWOOD Did he fuck. Treated me to a term in Horsham jail. He a spy?

THISTLEWOOD *approaches BONUS and circles him.*

THISTLEWOOD Do you catch the whiff of treachery, Black?

DAVIDSON I detect the stink of desperation, T.

BONUS Get away from me. Do I look like a spy to you?

THISTLEWOOD *(beat)* S'pose not. Spies are better dressed.

DAVIDSON Spies usually wear a hat.

BILLY My hat it has three corners,
Three corners has my hat.
And had it not three corners,
It would not be my hat.

WEDDERBURN Friends! Let us remember why we are here. At a time when we find
our cupboards void, our ceilings, that once bowed to the well fed beef
and the plump ham, are now adorned with famished spiders; when, on
raising our eyes, we find a race of bespangled creatures, enjoying
nothing but routs, fetes, balls and operas. I ask you, do they serve us,
or do they serve themselves?

Murmurs, grumbles, sounds of agreement.

WEDDERBURN When, in the place of the people's representatives, we have a tribe of
factious tools, adorned with offices, salaries, pensions and sinecures;
while in the land where a healthy people once flourished, is
supplanted a starved, skeleton race; when this is the case, would it
not be a matter of urgent importance to make a pause, to dispel the
torpescent apathy that has so long beset our political reason, and
enquire, why in the midst of luxuriant nature, are we left to famish on
the heath of poverty? Why this hunger in the midst of so much plenty?

Clapping, shouting, stamping.

WEDDERBURN And when we resist? What happens when we resist? They stamp on
our necks! They choke out our breath!

Jeering and hooting.

WEDDERBURN Who is responsible for this? Men like that bloodsucker, Sidmouth.

BILLY strikes up and ALL join in:

ALL Sidmouth with his two-faced smile,
Is worse than any crocodile!

WEDDERBURN And that angel-faced devil, Castlereagh.

ALL I met murder on my way,
He had a mug like Castlereagh!

WEDDERBURN All the gib-faced leasing-mongers in the Cabinet. All the cheats and
hornswogglers in the Privy Council. They have us by the balls. Can we
at least vote them out?

Shouts of 'NO!' and 'the hell we can!'

WEDDERBURN Tell me, my friends, are there any voters in all of Manchester?

ALL No! Not one!

WEDDERBURN In the swarming cities of Leeds and Birmingham?

ALL No! No!

WEDDERBURN Only the nobs can vote. Does that seem fair to you?

Shouts of 'shame!' and 'old corruption!'

WEDDERBURN Where is our representation?

Roars, jeers and stamping.

WEDDERBURN All political meetings banned. By act of parliament.

THISTLEWOOD It's crack-down after crack-down.

WEDDERBURN Habeus Corpus suspended. Again. What can we do? (*he lowers his voice*) I tell you what we can do. We can strike back. It's time to hit them where it hurts. What do you say, my friends?

BONUS I've had enough of this. Patty, we're leaving.

PATTY Speak for yourself. I'm not going anywhere.

BONUS Patty. I won't ask you again.

A tense moment. BONUS walks out.

PATTY Let him go. He don't have the stomach for it.

WEDDERBURN Anyone else want to skedaddle?

No-one moves.

THISTLEWOOD What do you propose, Bob?

WEDDERBURN I propose action. I propose we make a plan. And now, I want you to leave.

THISTLEWOOD Eh?

WEDDERBURN Go back home to your hungry children. Visit the tavern, if that's your pleasure, or take a tumble in the bawdyhouse. I want you to do a bit of thinking.

DAVIDSON Thinking? That won't help us now!

WEDDERBURN Hold your jaw, you doozy, and listen. If when you wake up in the cold light of dawn you are still resolved to embark upon this – venture – if your heart still burns with a lust for justice, return. Come back, and I will meet you here, and we will make our plan. Do you understand?

He stares round at them. Silence, nodding heads.

WEDDERBURN All right. And now I propose a toast! May the last of the Kings be
strangled with the guts of the last of the priests!

They cry agreement, and ALL toast. Then ALL sing:

We'll have no more of poverty,
So sing while you have breath,
We will take our liberty,
Or they must give us death!

Oh give me death or liberty,
It is better to die free,
Oh give me death or liberty,
Than live a slave to be.

*Rousting, singing and laughing, they exit, apart from the NARRATORS.
Also ELIZA, clearing up.*

Scene 3

- continuous -

COLMAN enters, reading from his new script, pen in hand.

COLMAN The natives take off heads like hats, and hang 'em on pegs in their
parlours.

BET Uh-oh! Colman's back.

WADDINGTON He's not meant to be here.

COLMAN Hello, what's this?

ELIZA Meeting's over, I'm afraid.

BET Do something, Waddie.

WADDINGTON What can I do?

ELIZA Left poor old me to do the clearing up.

COLMAN (*stunned*) Good God.

BILLY Too late, me ducks.

BET What's wrong with him?

COLMAN *is transfixed by ELIZA.*

COLMAN But – but you're – it's a miracle. Extraordinary.

ELIZA Is something the matter? Can I help?

COLMAN Er – you are – I mean – I beg your pardon. How do you do.

ELIZA Miss Elizabeth Wedderburn. Of Jamaica.

COLMAN George Colman. The Younger. At your service.

ELIZA Colman the playwright? How lovely to meet you.

COLMAN Playwright, yes, and er – recently promoted to chief examiner of plays.

ELIZA Oh? What is that?

BET She been living under a rock?

WADDINGTON She's foreign, you church bell.

COLMAN Do you not know?

ELIZA I haven't been here long, Mr Colman. Perhaps you could explain it to me. Would you like to sit? Some refreshment?

COLMAN Er – thank you, Miss Wedderburn. You see, every play must go through the Lord Chamberlain. It has been the case since 1737.

BET Oh here we go.

WADDINGTON Kill me now.

BET Aint there nothing we can do to stop him?

COLMAN My – ah – role as his deputy is to examine all theatrical entertainments.

ELIZA What on earth for?

WADDINGTON, BET *and* BILLY *put on white masks.*

COLMAN What for? Well – ah –

ELIZA It sounds like censorship.

WADDINGTON Some might call it censorship.

BET Political.

WADDINGTON Moral.

BILLY Sexual.

COLMAN No, no, no. I simply recommend omitting any passage that is – ah – palpably exceptionable.

ELIZA How would you define palpably exceptional?

WADDINGTON It must be palpable.

BET And exceptional.

COLMAN Ah, - political and personal allusions, grossness and indecency,
anything that would be improper.

BILLY Does that include farting?

BET I think not.

WADDINGTON Decidedly not. Flatulence is an essential component of any play worth
its salt.

ELIZA I see. And how do you define improper, Mr Colman?

COLMAN Call me George, my dear.

ELIZA George.

BILLY My dear.

COLMAN Well, ah – ah – that which would be considered improper by – er – any
– er – candid man.

BET Aha, the candid man.

WADDINGTON Thought he'd turn up sooner or later.

BILLY Who is this candy man?

ELIZA And who might he be, Mr Colman? George.

COLMAN Not an actual person, you understand, rather an abstraction. He's your ordinary, upstanding, reasonable Englishman.

BET Your all round good egg.

WADDINGTON Your plain-speaking, no nonsense kind of chap.

BET Your pint-in-the-pub, down-with-the-boys kind of man.

WADDINGTON Your say-it-how-it-is, speak-as-I-find kind of fella.

BET He says what we're all thinking.

WADDINGTON He says what no-one else dares say.

BET And for that, we love him.

WADDINGTON For that alone, we adore him.

BILLY plays a riff.

COLMAN So there you are, Miss Wedderburn. No need to concern yourself with such things.

ELIZA But indulge me a moment. Given that your candid man is so refreshingly – candid, why is there so much that is not allowed upon the stage?

COLMAN My dear, supposing you were to allow incest, adultery, murder? Such things as human nature and morality shudder against. Imagine the effect on the public mind.

ELIZA Do human nature and morality not shudder at Macbeth?

WADDINGTON If we can say that morality shudders.

COLMAN This is a bloody pantomime.

BILLY Macbeth is no pantomime, sir. It is a tragedy.

ELIZA Surely such plays feature the passions on which great dramatic performance is founded?

COLMAN Such plays are a matter of history. We cannot allow references to the times, or anything that may be applied to the existing moment. In this case I should say, 'you had better not allow it in your theatre, or there may be a hubbub.

BILLY A hubbub?

WADDINGTON I heard just the other day that the word 'reform' was mentioned in a play.

BET There was a terrible hubbub.

ELIZA I see. I am only a silly woman, but I do wonder how you reconcile this with the frequency of such themes in your own plays, which have met with such great success upon the stage?

COLMAN You have read my work?

ELIZA I have seen it performed.

COLMAN Ah! You have alighted on the problem exactly, Miss Wedderburn.

ELIZA Have I?

BILLY Has she?

COLMAN You are familiar with the plot of my opera, Inkle and Yarico?

ELIZA Let me see. Savage saves the life of English merchant, they fall in love, he sells her as a slave when she's pregnant with his child.

BET Spot on.

WADDINGTON Couldn't have put it better myself.

COLMAN The themes are repugnant, are they not?

ELIZA Indeed they are.

COLMAN They throw the very worst light upon the poor Englishman.

ELIZA The Englishman?

COLMAN And by extension on the whole nation.

WADDINGTON The candid man would be up in arms.

BET He would be foaming at the mouth.

COLMAN You see the problem.

WADDINGTON It is a horny dilemma.

BET A obfuscating situation.

BILLY A catawamptious complication.

COLMAN *takes ELIZA's arm.*

COLMAN I would like to make some serious changes. I intend to be radical, Miss Wedderburn.

ELIZA Call me Eliza, please.

COLMAN Allow me to say something to you, Eliza.

He leaves a dramatic pause.

COLMAN From the moment I saw you, I knew. You have been sent to me. For the new version of my play. This will be the most sweeping change of all. The most radical. You must be my Yarico!

ELIZA Me?

The others lower their masks.

WADDINGTON Her?

BET We're in trouble now, Waddington.

BILLY Pop goes the weasel.

COLMAN You are the real Yarico. Don't you see?

ELIZA I – am very flattered, George, but people such as myself do not go on the stage.

COLMAN That is precisely why it is so radical! It will be a first. Colman does it again!

ELIZA I am not an actress, George.

COLMAN That's easily overcome. A little training, directed by myself of course. In fact, I have the script here. Let us try you out. What do you say?

ELIZA Well, I – I – I could try.

BET Oh, bollocks.

COLMAN We could do the cave scene. It's when the lovers see each other for the first time. Take this, my dear. I know the lines by heart. Page five. Go from Hark, I heard a voice.

ELIZA/YARICO Ahem. Right. Er – hark, I heard a voice! Whence can it proceed? Is that right?

COLMAN Perfect. Go on.

ELIZA/YARICO Whence can it proceed? Ah, what form is this? Are you a man?

COLMAN/INKLE True flesh and blood, my charming heathen, I promise you.

Turns out ELIZA's a good actress.

ELIZA/YARICO What harmony in his voice! What a shape! How fair his skin too! Say, stranger, whence come you?

COLMAN/INKLE From a far distant land, driven on this coast by distress, and deserted by my companions.

ELIZA/YARICO Do you know the danger that surrounds you here? I shall try to preserve you, and if you must die, I must die too.

COLMAN/INKLE Generous maid. Then to you I will owe my life; and while it lasts, nothing shall part us.

COLMAN Marvellous. You are a natural, Eliza, my dear.

ELIZA Really?

COLMAN Absolutely. So what do you say? Will you do it? We could take London by storm. Oh, there will be detractors, of course, but just think. It's never been done before. The first real Yarico on the English stage!

ELIZA When you put it like that...

COLMAN So you will consider it? Wonderful. Let us begin our coaching right away. Come, my dear.

He offers her his arm and leads her off.

BILLY I heard a maid in Bedlam
So sweetly she did sing;
Her chains she rattled in her hands,
And always so sang she,
I love my love because I know
That he loves me.

Scene 4

- *continuous* -

WADDINGTON That wasn't meant to happen.

BET It was not.

WADDINGTON What are we going to do about it, Bet?

BILLY No time for that – look who's here.

CASTLEREAGH enters, holding a letter.

WADDINGTON Who's he?

BET Viscount Castlereagh, Leader of the House of Commons. Pretty, aint he?

WADDINGTON Leader of the wolf pack, more like.

BET Don't be fooled. They're all terrified. They're shaking with fear. I've seen it in their eyes. I've stared right into 'em.

WADDINGTON What are they frightened of? An uprising, a plot against the state?

BET On the contrary, my chaffinch. That's just the excuse they're looking for. They long for a plot. They are fretting and sweating and sighing and pining. They are dying for a plot!

BONUS *enters.*

BILLY I spy with my little eye, something beginning with B.

CASTLEREAGH I don't imagine they pay you much at the playhouse, Mr Bonus?

BONUS They do not pay well, Lord Castlereagh. Though I am a skilled artisan. But how did you know where I work?

CASTLEREAGH I make it my business to know things, Mr Bonus. What did you hope to gain when you sent me this note? (*holding up the letter*)

BONUS I hardly knew who to apply to, Sir. I had to do something to stop such a terrible – I could not stand by and see such people -

CASTLEREAGH I asked what you hoped to gain. Did you not hear me?

BONUS I don't know what you mean, Sir.

CASTLEREAGH If you imagine we pay to hear of every pathetic plot hatched against this government by the kind of scum you mix with, you are mistaken.

BONUS (*beat*) So why did you summon me here, Lord Castlereagh?

CASTLEREAGH Aha. There is life in him. He may do yet. It might surprise you to know we have been watching this group of ne'er-do-wells for some time. This is just the kind of opportunity we've been waiting for.

BONUS Opportunity, my Lord?

CASTLEREAGH Have you picked up any acting skills from your work at the theatre? Such things could come in useful.

BONUS I don't catch your meaning, Sir.

CASTLEREAGH Perhaps you don't know who you are dealing with, Bonus. They hate me in Ireland, do you know why? I put down the rebellion of my fellow countrymen. They hate me in France, do you know why? I all but stamped out their beloved Napoleon. They hate me here at home, do you know why? There are a dozen reasons but one stands out. *(beat)* Now don't be shy, Will Bonus. You must know what is said about me on the streets.

BONUS *stammers and shakes his head.*

CASTLEREAGH Can you imagine how it feels to be so hated, when all you have done your whole life is strive for peace? It is hard, Mr Bonus, on one's wife and children. *(beat)* The whole thing is a cooked-up slander. Are you and your tatterdemalion friends aware of that?

BONUS They are not my friends, Sir.

CASTLEREAGH And yet someone must keep you all safe. Someone must take it on the chin. Just as Christ himself was abused. The analogy should make me feel better, should it not?

BONUS If you don't need any more information, my Lord, I will get off.

CASTLEREAGH Stay, if you please. We are not finished here. I could have you arrested for sedition on the spot.

BONUS I – I don't see what more I can give you.

CASTLEREAGH (*beat*) Do you believe such evil-doers should be brought to justice?

BONUS Of course, if they can be prevented from –

CASTLEREAGH Prevention is not enough, Mr Bonus. They must be caught in the act if they are to be, how shall I put it, put out of action for good.

BONUS I'm not sure I –

CASTLEREAGH You are in need of funds, am I right?

BONUS Aren't many people I know that are not, Sir.

CASTLEREAGH You should count yourself lucky. I have a very profitable future mapped out for you, young man.

BONUS Sir, I don't wish to –

CASTLEREAGH It is gone beyond that! What you wish and don't wish are of no consequence. These are concerns of state, do you understand that?

BONUS Please, Mr Castlereagh, you have the wrong person.

CASTLEREAGH Don't be spineless, man. You will be perfectly safe. Even you will see the merits of the job once it is outlined to you. Now go. I tire of you. My man will see to everything.

BONUS I – I -

CASTLEREAGH Off you go, Bonus. I have important matters to attend to.

BONUS Please listen to me. I can't do it.

CASTLEREAGH You can and you will. Out!

BONUS *goes to exit.*

CASTLEREAGH And Bonus. It's no use trying to wriggle out of it. Remember, I know everything. There is nothing you can do which I will not know about. Is that clear?

Scene 5

The NARRATORS.

DAVIDSON, PATTY *and* THISTLEWOOD *enter.*

THISTLEWOOD Where are they? Wedderburn said he'd be here.

DAVIDSON Where is *she*, more to the point.

BET Alas, poor tinker.

WADDINGTON Your Liza slipped the noose.

BILLY A roving, a roving, a roving, since roving's been my ruin, I'll go no more a roving with you fair maid.

PATTY Colman beaten you to it, has he? Aw. Better luck next time.

DAVIDSON (*winks*) Luck has nothing to do with it, my little pat-a-cake.

PATTY Is he always like this?

THISTLEWOOD Don't you believe it. Black here took the last girl so seriously he swallowed a pint of poison when her daddy forbade the match.

PATTY Is that so?

DAVIDSON Nothing but fairy-tales, sweetheart.

THISTLEWOOD He came a-crying to me. T, he cries, I can't stand it no more.

DAVIDSON Come on, T, would I make such a mess of my grammar?

THISTLEWOOD To be a stranger in a strange land, he goes. To be so hated and despised.

BILLY To be or not to be, that is the question.

WADDINGTON Is poor Davidson doomed to suffer,

BILLY The slings and arrows of outrageous indigestion?

PATTY Oh, you poor parrot. But you got well again?

DAVIDSON Don't pay any attention to him. He's a bona fide bedlamite, is our T.

BONUS enters. He has on better clothes, including a hat.

THISTLEWOOD Look who it is. Mr Bonus himself.

DAVIDSON The wanderer returns.

PATTY Will. What you doing here?

BONUS slams some money down.

BONUS Here. See it as my contribution.

THISTLEWOOD What's this?

BONUS What does it look like? Enough to buy arms. Or grease a few palms.

DAVIDSON Why the sudden change of heart, Will Bonus?

PATTY Where'd you get that kind of chink?

BONUS It was just that – a change of heart. I thought about it. I read your book, by Mr Paine. It made me see how those tyrants have a grip on us working folk – how they abuse us. Those jackals in Parliament deserve to die, every one of them. Test me if you like. I will tear their throats out with my bare hands. Where do I swear?

THISTLEWOOD There'll be no need for that. Your word will be enough. If we believe you, that is.

A tense pause. PATTY watches BONUS closely. No-one speaks.

BILLY Round and round the racecourse,
Catch a little hare,
One step, two steps,
Tickle you under there!

THISTLEWOOD Shut it, Billy.

PATTY Where've you been these last days?

BONUS I needed time to think, Patty.

THISTLEWOOD Save the domestics for later. Where'd you get the money?

BONUS Huh? Oh, that was just luck. I had it from an aunt, who died recently. What better use to put it to?

PATTY You're looking awful smart, Will.

THISTLEWOOD Can't say I like your hat much.

BONUS Comrades, look, there is enough here for two dozen firearms. What further proof do you need of my loyalty?

Another pause. WEDDERBURN comes in.

WEDDERBURN Ah my friends, it is monstrous! It is rapine of the foulest kind!

THISTLEWOOD Bob. What's going on?

WEDDERBURN Have you not heard the news?

DAVIDSON What news?

PATTY What's happened? Tell us.

WEDDERBURN They have gone too far this time! Our wretched comrades in Manchester.

THISTLEWOOD What?

PATTY There was to be a meeting there.

BET A public meeting.

WADDINGTON At St Peter's Fields, just outside the city.

WEDDERBURN They gathered, in their thousands. Poor, working people, protesting peacefully against the miserable state this government has left them in. They came in solidarity, dressed for a festival, flying their flags, holding their children by the hand. They listened respectfully to the speeches. They chanted and sang. But the sight of so many hungry people was too much for the authorities at Manchester. Down came the yeomanry, astride their great horses, swords sharpened for the occasion. They trampled and slashed, chop, chop, chop.

PATTY It can't be true.

BONUS They set the military on them?

WEDDERBURN The people ran for their lives. Even as they fled they were cut down like beasts. Eleven killed, hundreds more maimed and crushed. Women and children among them.

PATTY Oh Lord above.

THISTLEWOOD It is nothing short of murder.

WEDDERBURN And what does Home Secretary Sidmouth do? He sends a message to the authorities. He congratulates 'em, on behalf of the Prince Regent, for keeping the peace!

THISTLEWOOD He thanks 'em?

PATTY For killing women and children?

BILLY God save the King.

DAVIDSON It's a foul crime.

WEDDERBURN It is an abomination. My friends, can we stand by while they cut down our comrades in the street? Will we wait for things to change until the flies buzz round our corpses? I say it is time to act. Time to follow the example of our French brothers and sisters. The axe must be laid to the root. No honest soul can rest easy in this country while Liverpool's men remain in office. Castlereagh, Sidmouth, Eldon – all have blood on their hands.

THISTLEWOOD We will butcher them, each and every one. Replace them with a government of the people.

BET That's easier said than done.

DAVIDSON We have arms. Thanks to my contacts in the army.

BONUS We have money, Mr Wedderburn.

WEDDERBURN Saw the light did you? Good lad. We will not be alone. Throughout the country the oppressed are crouching, ready to spring. And we must lead them.

BILLY Britons to arms! Fly, make haste! No rise of bread, no placemen, no tithes, all useless lumber. Off with their heads!

PATTY So where do we take 'em? In their beds?

WEDDERBURN We must organise. A committee must be convened.

THISTLEWOOD Committees be damned! There's no time!

WEDDERBURN I admire your courage, T, but we must use our heads. We have to garner support from the provinces if we're to –

DAVIDSON I say we move now, think later!

WEDDERBURN Black, this is not child's play. We must form a government in waiting. It takes planning.

BONUS I say why wait? Strike while the iron's hot!

The others voice agreement.

WEDDERBURN Have you lost your wits? We are all angry, but it's no good rushing in like hotheads.

THISTLEWOOD Maybe it's you who's lost his nerve? Getting a bit past it, are we, Bob?

WEDDERBURN I am telling you to use your noodle.

DAVIDSON What if we've had enough of your constant caution.

THISTLEWOOD Your old woman's ways.

WEDDERBURN Who are you calling an old woman, you bone-headed scarecrow?

PATTY Stop fighting. It won't help.

BONUS She's right, T.

THISTLEWOOD Shut your pus. It's time you understood, Robert Wedderburn. I've followed you a long time. And what have I got from it? Hot air. Well, hear this. Arthur Thistlewood is not your bitch.

DAVIDSON That goes for me too, Bob. We need more than words.

THISTLEWOOD We've had our fill of 'em. We need to hit them, and hit them hard. We'll have none of your fustilarian committees. I say we seize the moment. Are you with us, or not?

WEDDERBURN Davidson?

DAVIDSON Time to make your mind up, Wedderburn.

WEDDERBURN looks round at them. They are waiting.

THISTLEWOOD We'll give you till tomorrow. We're off to buy us some guns. Come on!!

They all exit, leaving WEDDERBURN and the NARRATORS.

BET Well, Bob.

WADDINGTON Now what?

BILLY Baa, baa, black sheep,
Have you any wool?
Yes sir, yes sir,
Three bags full!

WEDDERBURN Shut your noise, all of you. Leave me alone. I need to think.

WADDINGTON All right.

BET Keep your hair on.

BILLY We know where we're not wanted.

They exit (or retreat).

Scene 6
- *continuous* -

COLMAN *and* ELIZA *enter, both holding scripts.*

ELIZA Robert. How are you, dear brother? You look troubled.

WEDDERBURN I hear you're getting into theatricals, Eliza. Colman, is it?

COLMAN (*with distaste*) How do you do.

ELIZA George is going to put me in his play, Robert. I am to be Yarico. Can you believe it?

WEDDERBURN Very nice, I'm sure. You're not to use her ill, Colman, or you'll have me to answer to. Eliza was turned off the plantation when our father died. From Daddy's favourite to the hardships of the street overnight. I'll not have another white bastard mess her around.

ELIZA Robert! He's just teasing you, George.

COLMAN We were about to rehearse, actually, Wedderburn.

WEDDERBURN Go ahead, don't mind me. I've plenty to occupy my mind.

ELIZA You can be our audience.

COLMAN Very well. I think you'll like this scene, Eliza. It's when Inkle decides to return to England. Top of page 20. *If an opportunity offers*. Ready?

ELIZA Ready.

COLMAN / INKLE If an opportunity offers to return to my country, would you like to be my companion?

ELIZA / YARICO What, cross the seas?

COLMAN / INKLE You shall enjoy wonders. You shall be decked in silks, my brave maid, and have a house drawn with horses to carry you.

ELIZA / YARICO Nay, do not laugh at me – is it so?

COLMAN / INKLE It is indeed.

ELIZA / YARICO Will there not be dangers awaiting us there?

COLMAN / INKLE That might be true. Alas, you are quite ignorant of our country's customs.

ELIZA / YARICO No matter. I could follow you the world over, Inkle.

COLMAN / INKLE But what if I have to give way to men more powerful, who won't like to see me with you?

ELIZA / YARICO What will I care? The winds which blow round us, your arms for my pillow, will lull us to sleep, whilst we're rocked by each billow.

ELIZA What do you say, Robert?

WEDDERBURN Huh? Oh, very good, Eliza. Excellent show.

COLMAN Perhaps we should leave your brother to his thoughts. They clearly occupy him more deeply than my play ever will.

ELIZ Ah, look what you've done, brother. You've wounded the artist.

COLMAN I suppose you think that's funny.

He strides off.

ELIZA Oh dear. Did I say something wrong?

WEDDERBURN Let him go. He's a pompous windbag if ever I saw one.

ELIZA I must go to him.

She exits.

A pause.

WEDDERBURN Can it be murder to kill a tyrant? Does a slave have a right to kill his master, who refuses him his liberty? Has the time come to stop turning the other cheek? What happens when we refuse to forgive? When we demand someone answers for the sins of the fathers? Now that you have rid yourselves of the slave trade, you think you've been washed clean. Without making amends? What of us? Have we become your brothers now? You would like us to disappear. But you have not accounted for our anger, our trampled dignity, our broken bodies. How can we continue to live?

Be in no doubt, you men of power, we are coming for you. Where are you? Come out and face me! I am waiting for you. Come on, you statesmen! You lawyers and priests! You flapdoodling bughunters! Hypocrites all. Come out, you spooneys and cracksmen, enough of your tooling!

I will give you what you want. I will tell you the only story worth telling.
It is the story of an eye for an eye. In this story, it is only by your
death, that we are able to live.

Scene 7

The NARRATORS plus THISTLEWOOD and DAVIDSON. They sing:

Here's a health to us all and a lasting peace,
To faction an end, to wealth increase;
Come, let us drink while we have breath,
For there'll be no drinking after death,
And he that will this health deny,
Down among the dead men,
Down among the dead men let him lie.

BET Our plotters are in high spirits today.

WADDINGTON Each has recruited a handful of desperate men to join the cause.

BET And the weapons are piling up.

THISTLEWOOD What about pikes? Do we have enough of them, Black?

DAVIDSON We have the railings from some of the finest houses in Primrose Hill,
T.

WADDINGTON It is almost time to strike. All they need now is the right opportunity.

THISTLEWOOD You seen Wedderburn today?

DAVIDSON *shakes his head.*

DAVIDSON Old fella must have chickened out.

THISTLEWOOD Hard to believe, isn't it? Bob was always in the front rank.

DAVIDSON What about that saddle-goose Bonus. Where's he got to?

BONUS enters, excited, waving a newspaper.

BONUS Fellas! Look what I found!

DAVIDSON He's been in the library, T, reading the obituaries.

They laugh.

BILLY Laugh while ye may, me old muckers.

BONUS It's good news. The chance we've been waiting for.
They've organised a meeting. The whole cabinet is due to attend.

THISTLEWOOD Impossible.

BET Cabinet hasn't sat since the death of the King. It aint proper in times of
national mourning.

WADDINGTON Did we forget to mention the King popped his clogs?

BILLY The King is dead. Long live the King.

BONUS I tell you, they are to dine at Lord Harrowby's tonight. It was all
arranged last minute. (*reads*) Notice is hereby given of an
extraordinary, super-num-ar ...

THISTLEWOOD Give me that. (*snatches paper*) A supernura –

WADDINGTON Supernumerary.

THISTLEWOOD Thank you.

BONUS It means out of the ordinary.

THISTLEWOOD I know what it means, you loiter sack. 'The cabinet will sit down to dinner together, this very evening, to discuss grave matters pertaining to the state.' Do you know about this, Black?

DAVIDSON What paper is it?

WADDINGTON The New Times. It's a monarchist rag. No-one reads it.

BONUS It's down in black and white. What more do you want?

Pause.

THISTLEWOOD Where does this Harrowby live?

BONUS Grosvenor Square. Not ten minutes walk from here.

DAVIDSON The cabinet, all gathered in one place. The whole dirty lot of them.

Beat.

THISTLEWOOD To take them all, as they sit filling their obscene bellies. Do we have enough men? They'll be under guard.

DAVIDSON A few servants. Nothing we can't handle.

BONUS We'll need someone to set fires. There's Newgate, and the Bank of England, and the Bishop's palace.

THISTLEWOOD Oh yes, the Bishop. I'd like to be there when he burns!

They laugh.

PATTY enters, breathing hard.

BONUS Where've you been?

PATTY I came as fast as I could. Bob's been arrested.

THISTLEWOOD Arrested?

BILLY Ding dong bell,
 Pussy's in the well.

DAVIDSON When?

BONUS On what charge?

PATTY I was passing near the court of the King's Bench. I heard some clerks
 talking about it.

THISTLEWOOD But what's the charge?

PATTY I don't know. Blasphemy, sedition, one of them ones.

BET There's a big difference.

WADDINGTON Several feet of rope's worth of difference.

THISTLEWOOD That is damnable news.

DAVIDSON Does it mean they know about the plan?

BONUS No! Else why take just him, when they could take all of us? Why let it
 continue?

BET It's not the first time, let's be honest. Wedderburn gets picked up for
 something on a monthly basis.

WADDINGTON He's never happier than when he's in the dock.

BET Runs rings round the judge. Has the court eating out of his hand.

A pause.

THISTLEWOOD What if he squeals?

PATTY Bob'd never do such a thing!

DAVIDSON That's not Wedderburn's style, T.

A pause.

THISTLEWOOD We can't let it stop us.

DAVIDSON Agreed. One less gun. Double the fortitude.

BONUS There'll never be another chance like this one. We can't falter now.

THISTLEWOOD All right, mumble-crust. It's not for you to teach us lessons. So. This is the plan. Myself and Black lead a party to Grosvenor Square with the knives and carbines. We hide in the garden until the pigs are at the trough. We subdue the servants then dispatch the diners. Meanwhile Bonus and Patty take a group to set the fires, then wait for us at the artillery ground, with the blunderbusses and pikes. Any questions?

Silence.

THISTLEWOOD Let us slaughter the tyrants! All those in favour say Aye.

ALL Aye!

BILLY Ayes to the right, and noes to the left,
The soup's full of feathers and mother is deaf.
If wishes were horses then beggars would ride
If turnips were bayonets, I'd wear one by my side.

WADDINGTON See how such plans are formed.

BET In haste, in hope, in hunger.

WADDINGTON What vicious thugs, you're thinking. Either that or they're soft in the head.

BET But what do you know of desperation? Since when did you have nothing to lose?

WADDINGTON It can't be true, you're thinking. There's nothing like this in my history book.

BET Who wrote your history book? Was it people like us?

The CONSPIRATORS swing into action, singing a song. As they sing, they take guns, swords and pikes, loading them, readying them, etc.

ALL Fire in the gallery, fire in the house,
Fire in the beef kid, scorching the scouse.
Fire in the cabin, fire in the hold,
Fire in the strong room melting the gold.
Fire round the capstan, fire on the mast,
Fire on the main deck, burning it fast.
Fire in the lifeboat, fire in the gig,
Fire in the pig-sty roasting the pig.
Fire on the waters, fire high above,
Fire in our hearts for the friends that we love.

A loud banging from off stops the song. A voice bellows:

COME OUT! COME OUT IN THE NAME OF THE KING!

They look at each other. THISTLEWOOD raises a carbine and DAVIDSON unsheathes a sword.

A thunderous crash, then darkness.

Act II

Scene 1

BET, BILLY *and* WADDINGTON.

WADDINGTON Ladies and gentlemen, quines and quizzes, ribs and swells, welcome back.

BET Did you miss us?

WADDINGTON It is time to return to the disproportioned, sodomitical streets of St Giles. Dive once again into that putrid sewer. Submerge yourselves in its rancid waters, and rise back up to break the scummy surface -

BILLY With a rat in your pocket.

BET The story aint over yet. Not by a country mile.

WADDINGTON But do not fret, my swains and damsels. We are here to steer you through the foul miasma. Armed only with the blade of satire.

BILLY Satire is my weapon, as the Pope once said.

BET I'm pretty sure he didn't, Billy.

WADDINGTON Alexander Pope, the English poet.

BET Never mind that. These people want to know what's happened. When we last saw the others, they were rushing headlong into the jaws of a trap.

WADDINGTON All in good time. First we must follow up on some other developments. There is more than one thread to this web.

BILLY Incy wincy spider, climbing up the spout.

Down came the rain and washed the spider out.

BONUS *is heard, off.*

BONUS I will see him. It is my right. Where is he? Where is the bastard?

BONUS *crashes in.*

BONUS Where is Lord Castlereagh? I want to see him, dammit!

CASTLEREAGH *comes in, taking his time.*

CASTLEREAGH Ah. If it isn't Mr Bonus. And I thought you miles away by now. I hope you are not going to make an unpleasant scene. I hate scenes.

BONUS It was terrible, Mr Castlereagh. I only just managed to escape!

CASTLEREAGH What did you expect? A tea party?

BONUS It was carnage. There were runners everywhere. Blood and smoke and shouting. I feared for my life.

CASTLEREAGH Let's not exaggerate. A man was killed, unfortunately, but he was not one of yours. So you are not happy with your work?

BONUS You gave me no warning.

CASTLEREAGH And risk the plot being abandoned at the last minute? It was a very satisfactory result. The crowd will be treated to a spectacle, come execution day.

BONUS I can't wipe it from my mind. I can't rest. It haunts me, Sir.

CASTLEREAGH You come here, to my office of state, to tell me that you aren't getting enough sleep?

BONUS You promised I'd be safe. Now I'm being called as a witness. That was not our bargain!

CASTLEREAGH Calm down, man. There are 180 witnesses on the list. You won't be called. *(beat)* Men such as me do not make bargains with people like you, Bonus. I would tread carefully if I were you.

BONUS If they call me, I won't go. I'd be cut down before I got through the doors. Everywhere I go I hear my name whispered - the alehouses, the streets. They hate me, they will murder me. I want a ticket to America. You owe it to me, Castlereagh.

CASTLEREAGH Stop whining like a woman. I owe you nothing.

BONUS I shan't stay in London. You can't make me.

CASTLEREAGH I have no intention of making you stay in London.

BONUS I want my ticket to America, or I'll expose you. I'll shout it loud for all to hear, what you are.

CASTLEREAGH *(very still)* Whatever could you mean by that, Bonus?

BONUS I will spill it – all of it – the money, the cooked up scheme. I will shop you and this whole rotten government.

CASTLEREAGH *(relaxing)* No, you won't. You stick your head above the parapet, you'll lose it. Now's the time to lie low till it blows over. In a few days those devils will be strung up and cut into pieces before a craven mob. They'll be under the quicklime in Newgate and forgotten in a couple of days. Consigned to the footnotes of history, as people like them always are. And you will be able to live out your miserable life unscathed. It is time for you to leave. Crawl away into a hole somewhere, will you.

BONUS Where should I go?

CASTLEREAGH I hear the Isle of Wight is a good place to rot for a while. Take the address from my man. Now get out of my sight, you snivelling coward, or I'll have you removed.

BONUS What am I to do?

CASTLEREAGH That is not my concern. (*shouts*) I said go! Fuck off!

BONUS has no choice but to go.

Scene 2

COLMAN and ELIZA, in mid-canoodle.

COLMAN What a frisson we shall give them, Eliza. The old bats in the upper circle will have conniptions. The sight of my little savage in her animal skins is sure to bring out the beast in me. Beware of the beast.

He growls and nuzzles but she is preoccupied.

COLMAN We are distracted today, aren't we. What is wrong?

ELIZA Nothing, my dear. I'm just a little worried about my brother.

COLMAN If I know one thing, it's that your brother can take care of himself. Don't you want to hear my new ending?

ELIZA Of course, George. I'd like nothing better.

COLMAN I've made a copy, just for you. See.

He gives her a script.

COLMAN Thank you.

ELIZA Thank you, George. How thoughtful of you.

COLMAN Shall we give a little read?

ELIZA If you would like to.

COLMAN It's only a new version of a Colman opera. Let's not bother.

ELIZA Oh George. I'm sorry. Please don't be offended. I can't wait to read it.

COLMAN All right then. We'll go from *Come let us fly*. On the first page. Yarico is trying to persuade Inkle to leave the city. That's you, Eliza.

ELIZA/YARICO Come let us fly, and seek the woods where no cares will vex us. You shall hunt down game, and I shall pick berries. We shall be so happy!

COLMAN / INKLE These are the trifles of an unenlightened Indian. We Christians hunt money, a thing unknown to you. 'Tis money which brings us ease, power and happiness. You are the bar to my attaining this, it is therefore necessary that we must part.

ELIZA / YARICO I gave up everything for you. My friends, my country, all that was dear to me. I would follow you the world over.

COLMAN / INKLE We waste time. I shall ascertain the price for women in Bristol, and sell you tomorrow.

ELIZA / YARICO Oh, barbarous! Do not abandon me!

COLMAN / INKLE Enough, I am fixed.

ELIZA / YARICO Stay but a little; soon I shall sink with grief. Tarry till then and hear me bless your name when I am dying, and beg you now and then, when I am gone, to heave a sigh for your poor Yarico.

ELIZA Oh dear.

COLMAN What's wrong, Eliza?

ELIZA It's pretty awful. I mean sad. It's tragic.

COLMAN Ah, but this is before my changes. Turn over the page. See what I have done. Where it says *My father bent my tender mind*.

COLMAN / INKLE My father bent my tender mind, from infancy, like a young sapling, around the grand prop of *interest*. As I grew up, he taught me not to care for the world. Men should live for themselves.

COLMAN Then a little pause, see? Then he says, *Principles which I renounce!*

ELIZA Oh.

COLMAN / INKLE Renounce entirely. Nature has penetrated to my heart; now it bleeds for my poor Yarico. Let me clasp her to it, while 'tis glowing.

ELIZA / YARICO And shall we be happy?

COLMAN / INKLE Aye, ever, ever, Yarico.

COLMAN There it is. What do you think?

ELIZA Is that your new ending?

COLMAN They get married, everyone's happy, etc. etc.

ELIZA He doesn't sell her after all.

COLMAN The Englishman sees the error of his ways.

ELIZA It's rather abrupt.

COLMAN We must modernise, Eliza. Catch up with the public mood.

ELIZA But Inkle's sudden transformation. Do you think it convincing?

COLMAN Forgive me, but what would someone like you know of drama? When I want your opinion, I'll ask for it.

ELIZA I thought you were asking for my opinion.

COLMAN I was asking you to play the part, Eliza. Do you really think you're qualified to judge the content?

ELIZA I am sorry, I –

COLMAN Perhaps you don't know who I am? If you did, you might see the absurdity of commenting on my script. I think I have had quite enough critique for one day.

COLMAN *leaves.*

ELIZA Oh dear. Looks like I said something wrong again.

ELIZA is torn. Should she run after him?

After a bit she leaves in the opposite direction to COLMAN.

Scene 3

The NARRATORS.

WEDDERBURN is in jail. In chains.

WADDINGTON I hope you haven't forgotten about our friend, Robert Wedderburn.

BET He that's languishing in a prison cell, on a charge of blasphemy.

The door clangs. PATTY enters.

BIILLY Pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake, baker's man, bake me a cake as fast as you can.

WEDDERBURN Patty! What are you doing here? Are you all right? Where are the others? The bastards here won't tell me nothing.

PATTY I wanted to see you, Bob. But I aint staying long.

WEDDERBURN Are you a prisoner?

PATTY I thought you might want to know what occurred, in your absence.

WEDDERBURN Tell me. Please.

PATTY It was a bloody mess, if you want to know. We was surprised before we even left for Grosvenor Square.

BET Several men of the Bow Street persuasion. Watching and waiting all day, they were.

WADDINGTON And half a regiment hiding round the corner.

PATTY They smashed their way in. It was worse than bedlam.

BET T engaged them right away, shot a runner through the chest.

WADDINGTON Black slashed the candles and after that, all was dark and chaos.

PATTY You couldn't tell one body from another, friend from foe. Will Bonus, that shit! - jumped from the window and scuttled away. Before I knew it, they were on me.

BET Patty grabbed a pike but she was no match for the runners.

PATTY One of them sat on me till it was over.

WADDINGTON Thistlewood blasted his way through and ran out the back. Davidson fought like a tiger till he was taken.

WEDDERBURN Did T get away?

PATTY All I know is, he was arrested next day.

BET He made it to the safe-house in Marylebone but they knew where to find him.

WEDDERBURN Where are they now?

PATTY Here. In this same jail.

WEDDERBURN Here? When is the trial?

PATTY The trial is already done, Bob.

WEDDERBURN *starts up.*

WEDDERBURN No.

PATTY T and Black are sentenced to be hung, drawn and quartered.

Pause.

WEDDERBURN Where is Bonus? Was he at the trial?

PATTY Bonus is nowhere to be found.

WEDDERBURN The snake.

PATTY He was rotten from the first. It was him what brought the money. Him what found the safe house. Him what told them about the cabinet meeting.

BET Tsk. What meeting.

PATTY Don't know why I didn't see it.

WEDDERBURN Probably in America by now.

PATTY Most likely.

PATTY looks steadily at WEDDERBURN.

WEDDERBURN Why do you stare at me like that? You accusing me of something?

PATTY I don't get it, Bob. Perhaps you can help me. I'm finding it hard to see why you was arrested when you was.

WEDDERBURN Don't ask me. I'm damned if I can make sense of this government. You know as well as I do this was cooked up, it has their smell all over it. That weakling Bonus was a gift in their lap. He is the guilty one, not me.

PATTY We all want to see him swing. But that don't change your part in all this. While you cooled your heels in here, we was caught like rats in a trap. When did you realise it was rotten? Why didn't you put a stop to it?

WEDDERBURN You think I control that mad dog Thistlewood? And young Davidson, a vain peacock with a death wish? They were doomed before I ever called myself their leader.

PATTY What did you do, walk in the magistrates and hand yourself in?

WEDDERBURN What did you do, Patty? Why are you not sentenced to hang?

PATTY What do you care, since you've washed your hands of it?

WEDDERBURN Cut a deal with them, have you?

PATTY You could call it that.

BET Since you like the blacks so much, they said.

WEDDERBURN Transportation?

BILLY Afrikey is where the blacks belong.

WADDINGTON It's a tough life, but it's a fresh start.

BILLY Sea air and Leonie, my one true love.

WEDDERBURN What? They can't send you there. That's their pet project for clearing blacks off the streets of London.

PATTY They need women, Bob. Black skin is optional.

WADDINGTON There's a terrible shortage of wives.

WEDDERBURN You won't last a minute over there.

PATTY It was that or the gallows. What would you have done?

BILLY Pat it and prick it and mark it with B. And put it in the oven for baby and me.

BET Used to be just whores they shipped. Now they take convicts as well as strumpets. Marry them off to a man they've never met, and pack 'em onto the boats.

WEDDERBURN Oh, Patty. I am so sorry.

PATTY So now you know. I'll be getting off, then. I say, let me out!

WEDDERBURN Wait. Don't go, Patty. Don't leave me so soon.

PATTY I hope your conscience is clear, Bob. I really do.

She exits. The door clangs.

BILLY Hey diddle diddle the cat and the fiddle
The cow jumped over the moon
The little dog laughed to see such sport
And the dish ran away with the spoon.

Scene 4

- continuous -

ELIZA is heard, off.

ELIZA Robert? Are you there?

The door clangs. ELIZA enters. She rushes to embrace WEDDERBURN.

ELIZA Oh my poor Robert. I've been so worried. Are you all right?

WEDDERBURN I am well, sister. There's no need to worry.

ELIZA This is a vile place.

WEDDERBURN I've seen worse. At least I got rats to talk to. What about you, Eliza?
How's the theatricals coming along?

ELIZA There is something I must tell you. But it can wait. Have they given
you a date for the trial?

WEDDERBURN Out with it, then. I could do with some good news.

ELIZA Promise you won't be silly about it, Robert. George Colman and I are in love. We are to be married. Isn't it wonderful?

WEDDERBURN The playwright?

ELIZA Oh don't criticise him, Robert. Are you not bowled over by our good fortune? Yes, I include my dear brother in my good fortune. Though we might have to tidy you up just a little, Bobby, if you are to be seen in public with me.

WEDDERBURN Eh?

ELIZA Not that I'm ashamed of you – far from it – but perhaps it's time to start thinking of our good name. Our father's name.

WEDDERBURN Our father? That parish bull? Him that took our mothers and cast them onto the dung heap?

ELIZA Such a name goes a long way. Especially here.

WEDDERBURN Listen, I am glad of your match, Eliza, if that's what you want. But you won't make a gentrified jollocks of me. I spit on that name. I'd sooner change it. I'd take my mother's name. And you should take yours.

ELIZA (*beat*) Our mothers, if you recall, Robert, did not have as much in common as you like to think. Yours was a slave, for a start.

WEDDERBURN You point to such distinctions now? You, who crawled across the ocean and flung yourself at my feet, when they put you out with nothing but a cracked sixpence? This is how they treat us, Eliza. They need us to stay down. All your life you have been begging for titbits from their table. You should be crashing onto it and breaking the crockery.

ELIZA Is that not what I am doing now? Getting a seat at the table?

WEDDERBURN On their terms, Eliza.

ELIZA I see. You are jealous, Robert. You are jealous, because I have risen up. You paint them all with the same brush. But the times are changing. I don't want to live in the past. I've been given an opportunity to breathe. And I will take it, whether you come along with me or not.

Pause.

WEDDERBURN You ought to go, sister. The sights and smells round here are not good for a person.

ELIZA *(beat)* Will you come to see me, at the playhouse?

WEDDERBURN You can find me at the playhouse any night of the week, in the cheap seats.

ELIZA *(tearful)* Oh, Robert.

WEDDERBURN On your way then. No sad goodbyes.

She leaves.

Scene 5

WADDINGTON *and* BET *narrate.*

BILLY *accompanies.*

The rest of the cast are the crowd. CONSTABLE 1, CONSTABLE 2, FRUIT SELLER (f), BROADSIDE CRYER, MOTHER, GENT, RADICAL.

WADDINGTON The execution of the conspirators attracts a crowd of close on a hundred thousand.

BET Tumult and uproar are on the cards.

WADDINGTON The riot act has been read. The foot and life guard has been deployed. Six field pieces of flying artillery on Blackfriars bridge. The city light horse under arms in Grays Inn road.

BET The constables ring the scaffold.

CONSTABLE 1 We have orders to disperse 'em if there's trouble.

CONSTABLE 2 Gotta keep 'em at a distance, so they can't catch the final words of the condemned.

FRUIT SELLER It's a crying shame, to rob them of their last words.

WADDINGTON Says the fruit seller, wheeling her barrow through the crowd.

FRUIT SELLER This mob'll be their best audience ever, and this will be their final show.

BROAD'E CRYER One performance only!

WADDINGTON Calls the broadside cryer, touting his pamphlets.

BROAD'E CRYER Get it while you can.

BET They're all here. The cits, the drabs, the blades and the swells.

WADDINGTON The grubbers and dippers, the welshers and wagtails. Fish fags and toshers, mongrels and cracksmen, snouts and narks.

BET The rufflers and Billingsgates, doxies and trulls. Same lot you'd see at the theatre, any day of the week.

MOTHER We like to make a day of it. Bring along a picnic.

WADDINGTON Says the mother of three, holding up the baby, who squeals for glee.

MOTHER The little one loves a hanging.

GENT Such odious levity!

BET Frowns the fine gent, paying for his place at the window of a nearby house.

GENT Merely satisfying a curiosity, you understand,

WADDINGTON The crowd begin to press against the barrier.

CONSTABLE 2 There's gonna be trouble.

FRUIT SELLER There'll be fainting, I shouldn't wonder.

BROAD'E CRYER And trampling for sure.

BET Now the Lord Mayor and his henchmen appear. The minister, brandishing his bible, hoping for a convert.

WADDINGTON The executioner and the surgeon, hidden behind masks, their assistants by their side.

BROAD'E CRYER All part of the show.

BET Davidson and Thistlewood begin to climb the steps to the platform.

A low murmur, rising in intensity.

MOTHER Hats off in front!

BROAD'E CRYER Let's have a view!

WADDINGTON The condemned men's irons are struck off. They're given oranges to eat.

BET A glass of wine to toast the King. Which Thistlewood refuses.

RADICAL Your friends are here!

WADDINGTON Shouts a radical in the crowd, receiving in return a smile from Davidson. The priest approaches, holding his Bible high. Thistlewood turns him away.

BET What have I done? says he, that I should ask pardon for?

WADDINGTON While Davidson begins to giggle.

BET Albion is still in the chains of slavery.

WADDINGTON Thunders Thistlewood.

BET I quit it without regret.

A cheer from the crowd.

BET Aye, my body will soon lie underneath this soil. My only sorrow is that this same soil should be a theatre for slaves, for cowards and for despots.

WADDINGTON The executioner pulls the hoods down over their heads. The nooses are placed around their necks. Position it right, my man.

BET Says Davidson, adjusting the noose around his neck.

WADDINGTON Finish me tidily, if you please.

GENT The world must be rid of such monsters.

BET Says the gent from behind his window.

MOTHER God bless you, Thistlewood!

BET And the men begin to sing: We'll have no more of poverty,
So sing while you have breath,

WADDINGTON The crowd joins in.

ALL We will take our liberty,
Or they must give us death!
Oh give me death or liberty,
It is better to die free,
Oh give me death or liberty,
Than live a slave to be.

The constable fires his musket in the air. The singing stops.

WADDINGTON The traps fall.

A collective intake from the crowd. Then sighs and moans and whistles.

RADICAL Murder!

BET Shouts the radical, as Davidson kicks and chokes for a full five
minutes more. The executioner has to pull on his legs.

GENT It's revolting. In a civilised society, this sort of thing should take place
behind closed doors.

WADDINGTON They cut the bodies down, and the surgeon steps forward.

BET He takes the hood from Thistlewood's purple face and lays his neck upon the block. He takes a knife and saws until the blood soaks the sawdust.

The crowd howls, hisses and shrieks. Reactions of horror, strange movements. The constable points and jabs with his musket.

RADICAL Shoot that murderer! Bring out Bonus, the spy!

The MOTHER falls down in a swoon.

FRUIT SELLER 'Tis naught but butchery!

WADDINGTON The executioner holds up Thistlewood's head by the hair, and shouts to the crowd, this is the head of Arthur Thistlewood, the traitor!

BET But it is slippery with blood. He drops it.

BROAD'E CRYER Butterfingers!

The crowd laughs, a ghastly sound.

BET The executioner and his assistants shove the body in the coffin, along with the head. Now it's Davidson's turn, but the blunted knife will not go through his neck. Another knife is brought. And then another.

The crowd buzz angrily.

BROAD'E CRYER A hanging is all very well, but this is bungling.

WADDINGTON Finally another head is held up to the crowd. This is the head of William Davidson, the traitor!

BET The place begins to take on the look of a slaughterhouse.

WADDINGTON The head is placed in the coffin. The crowd falls silent.

Pause.

CONSTABLE 1 Right! Show's over.

CONSTABLE 2 Time to go home.

No-one moves.

CONSTABLE 1 Did you hear me? I said on your way!

CONSTABLE 2 Or face the consequences!

Pause.

GENT Indeed. Only too glad to. The mob disgusts me.

BET The crowd begins to stir.

WADDINGTON The radical feels the moment slipping away.

RADICAL What better time to begin the glorious revolution? My friends, are you with me?

BET The fruit-seller tears her eyes away from the scaffold.

FRUIT SELLER A lot of work to do. Bills to pay, children to feed.

The FRUIT SELLER starts to wheel away her barrow. The BROADSIDE CRYER offers his pamphlets.

BROAD'E CRYER One last chance! All of the details! The final letters to their loved ones, what they ate for their last meal, the colour of their last shit.

CONSTABLE 1 Move it along now.

The crowd begins to shuffle off.

MOTHER Not a bad day, all in all.

RADICAL Wait. Just listen. Please.

MOTHER Time to go home, love. Some of us need to get the tea.

Scene 6

WEDDERBURN, *still in jail.*

The door clangs and WILLIAM WILBERFORCE enters.

WILBERFORCE Robert Wedderburn. We finally meet.

WEDDERBURN Who's that?

WILBERFORCE Do you not know me? Have I not featured in enough of your jests?

WEDDERBURN One old white geezer looks much like another in this light. Oh, I see. It's Willie Wilberforce himself. Blow me down.

WILBERFORCE I hear you are charged with blasphemy, Mr Wedderburn.

WEDDERBURN They don't take to the content of my sermons, for some reason. Have you come to take up my case, Mr Wilberforce?

WILBERFORCE *(beat)* I suppose you have heard about the fate of your friends?

WEDDERBURN So you are come here to gloat. Get out, before I throw you out.

WILBERFORCE I came to talk to you. *(beat)* I feel compelled to request, in the spirit of friendship, that you leave off blaspheming against the church and subverting the king.

WEDDERBURN Are those institutions so weak they are afraid of allowing us to laugh?

WILBERFORCE Would it not be better to speak on behalf of your fellow blacks? Direct your prodigious energy into the emancipationist cause, instead of squandering it on feckless desperadoes?

WEDDERBURN The cause you have abandoned? Now that the trade is ended and the English can pretend they no longer profit from slavery?

WILBERFORCE We are still working tirelessly -

WEDDERBURN What is it you're called now? The Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery Throughout the Dominions – oh sorry, I dropped off there for a minute.

WILBERFORCE You would be content to entrust abolition to those insufferable women, with their boycotts and badges?

WEDDERBURN I take my hat off to the women. But we both know what it will take, and that is money. All the moralising in the world will cut no ice until the British see money on the table for the loss of their property.

WILBERFORCE Your view of this nation is as jaded a one as ever I heard.

Pause.

WILBERFORCE I must say it does seem rather convenient, a spell in prison just as your friends are executed for high treason.

Beat.

WILBERFORCE Would you like to know my opinion?

WEDDERBURN No, but you will tell it to me.

WILBERFORCE I think the powers that be feared your oratory more than your plotting. (*beat*) You have great influence over the poor, Mr Wedderburn.

WEDDERBURN I see. We have got to the nub of it. Reforming the vices of the lower orders. Mr Wilberforce's great object in life.

WILBERFORCE My other great object, as you know, is the release of your fellow countrymen from bondage. You do not consider the abolition of the trade an achievement?

WEDDERBURN You should know, Mr Wilberforce, that as long as you curb people's liberty, they will find ways to resist.

WILBERFORCE Only when they are stoked up by such firebrands as you, Wedderburn.

WEDDERBURN You want the poor to remain in ignorance and superstition, while the rich may have as many copies as they like of sceptical writers like Shaftesbury and Hume.

WILBERFORCE Why not write a book yourself? Many of your fellows have done so. Why not prove to the English that you are just as civilised and enlightened as they?

WEDDERBURN Because I am not.

WILBERFORCE Not what?

WEDDERBURN Civilised and enlightened. I do not want to write a book. I am not in the business of trying to prove that the negro is not an ape, Mr Wilberforce.

WILBERFORCE Come, Wedderburn, no reasonable man would make such –

WEDDERBURN Is that so? Then why did you have the blacks separated from the whites by a screen at your recent African Society dinner?

WILBERFORCE That was due to the ladies – you know how they can be.

Beat.

WEDDERBURN On second thoughts, maybe I should write a book. I could include a full account of Wilberforce's campaign against the less fortunate in society.

WILBERFORCE As you well know, my only campaign is against drunkenness and debauchery.

WEDDERBURN Except when the rich do it. Then it's all right.

Beat.

WILBERFORCE You face a year of hard labour at least. That could finish off a man of your age, Mr Wedderburn.

WEDDERBURN I have walked free on greater charges.

WILBERFORCE Your clever rhetoric is well known. But your luck may yet run out. A charge of blasphemy is much easier to prove than one of sedition.

WEDDERBURN So you are offering to put in a word for me, Mr Wilberforce. If I promise to stop preaching revolution to the poor? 'Tis easily done. I was thinking myself of a change, once I get out. You get time for thinking in here, you know. I was considering opening a bawdyhouse. What do you say to that?

WILBERFORCE Is that supposed to be funny? There is no reasoning with you. Guard. Let me out. Good day to you, Mr Wedderburn.

WEDDERBURN Drop by again soon, Wilber. We should share a tot of rum sometime.

WILBERFORCE *exits and the door clangs.*

Scene 7

COLMAN, *writing his script.*

ELIZA *enters. She goes and kisses him.*

ELIZA Hello, my darling. How is the work coming along?

COLMAN So, so.

ELIZA Have you forgiven me after our little misunderstanding? Please say you have, George.

COLMAN All is forgiven, my dear. Let us talk no more of it.

ELIZA I have been to the prison to see my poor brother. The conditions are appalling. *(beat)* A word from you would help enormously.

COLMAN From me? You want me to speak for that ruffian?

ELIZA He's my brother, George.

COLMAN Your half brother. It might be time, Eliza, to distance yourself, just a little. And I can't say I approve of you going to the prison, either.

ELIZA Lucky we are not married yet, then, so you cannot prohibit me.

COLMAN Well strictly speaking, my dear –

ELIZA Guess what else I've been doing? I've been learning my lines. Shall I practice on you a little, my love?

COLMAN Ah - about that. I've been thinking, my dear. I'm not sure that London is quite ready.

ELIZA Ready for what?

COLMAN How can I put it – for your kind of Yarico.

ELIZA Of course some people will object. But you said you wished to be radical. That we would triumph in the end.

COLMAN All the same, I think it might be wisest to delay. Just until next season.

ELIZA Next season? The play may not be running next year, George.

COLMAN Of course it will. Now don't look like that. You can look quite unprepossessing when you put on your parts.

ELIZA I don't understand, that's all. I'd like you to explain it to me.

COLMAN Elizabeth. I do not appreciate you coming in here when I'm trying to work and throwing a childish fit. Had it occurred to you that your acting skills may not be quite as brilliant as you imagine?

ELIZA You praised my acting skills.

COLMAN One can be blinded by feminine wiles. You women have quite a range when you want to ensnare a man.

ELIZA George, we are engaged. Do you expect me to marry a man who refers to our love-making as a snare?

COLMAN Frankly, I do not.

ELIZA You do not what?

COLMAN Expect you to marry me. I see now we have been too hasty. I think it might be best to wait a little.

ELIZA Wait? How long for?

COLMAN Well, let me see...

ELIZA What are you expecting me to do in the meantime?

COLMAN Whatever you like, silly girl. But if you wish, I can – ah, ah – set you up in a little house in Mayfair. A couple of servants of your own, a little dog. How would you like that?

ELIZA Are you proposing that I become your mistress?

COLMAN There's no need to put it in quite such bald terms, my dear.

ELIZA How would you put it, George?

COLMAN *(pause)* Do you turn down my offer of a house? You really are the most ungrateful wretch. I come upon you destitute, attached to some ragged troupe of vagabonds; I offer to raise you up, and you throw it in my face. Frankly, a girl in your position would be better learning her place in the world.

ELIZA What place is that?

COLMAN Did you genuinely imagine, Eliza, that we could be married? A man like me, with all respectable society looking on, to a woman like you? Do I have to spell it out? Do you think any reasonable man in this whole country would join in Christian marriage with a black? If I were you, I'd take the house and the lapdog and shut your little mouth before I change my mind.

ELIZA does not reply. She staggers a little.

COLMAN There you see. It's not so bad, is it? Shall we have a little less pouting and a little more petting? I say, we could make our own drawing room version of the play. For a private audience. What a splendid idea. We could introduce a bit of sauce. You could play your precious Yarico

after all, my little poppet. What a romp that would be. What do you say, Liza? It all seems better when you look at it that way, doesn't it?

ELIZA I had not looked at it that way, George.

COLMAN But you see it makes sense, don't you, my angel?

ELIZA It makes perfect sense, George.

COLMAN There you are. I knew you'd come round. Only an absolute fool would turn an offer like that down.

ELIZA A fool indeed.

COLMAN We're going to have a lot of fun, aren't we, Liza my dear?

ELIZA Yes, George. A lot of fun.

COLMAN Right. Well if you don't mind I must pay a visit to the Chamberlain's office. Still such a lot to get through.

ELIZA (*murmurs*) Stay but a little; soon I shall sink with grief.

COLMAN I beg your pardon?

ELIZA No, nothing George.

COLMAN Jolly good. Until later then.

He leaves. She sinks to the ground.

Scene 8

BET, WADDINGTON *and* BILLY.

BET That's it! I can't take it no more.

WADDINGTON I beg your pardon?

BET For fuck's sake, Waddington. How long are we gonna stand by and watch this? It's nothing but a catalogue of death, betrayal and misery.

BILLY You knew that when we started out, me duck.

WADDINGTON Story's over, Bet. It's too late to change it now.

BET Aint never too late. I won't stand for it. We've gotta do something.

WADDINGTON Intervene, you mean? Is that possible? Is it ethical?

BET I don't give a witches tit. All I know is, we're here and that makes us party to it. Accessories.

BILLY I'm no-one's accessory.

BET Waddie. Are you even listening to me?

WADDINGTON Hm.

A pause. CASTLEREAGH walks in.

BET Oh gimme strength, it's him again. Where's he going at this time of night?

BILLY Round and round the garden,
Catch a little hare,

One step, two steps,
Tickle you under there!

WADDINGTON You wanna do something? Come on, then.

WADDINGTON *sidles out.*

WADDINGTON (*boyishly*) Why hello Mister, and what might you be doing out so late?

CASTLEREAGH Using the privies, what else would I be doing?

WADDINGTON Some might say a man like you would be better off tucked up in bed at home with his wife, at such an hour.

CASTLEREAGH How do you know I have a wife? Do you know me?

WADDINGTON Wife or no wife, it's all the same to me, duck. Should I know you? Are you famous?

CASTLEREAGH I am not. I am nobody. But you seem familiar to me.

WADDINGTON Oh, you know how it is. We all look the same. Perhaps we should continue our little chat at your lodgings. It might be more comfortable.

CASTLEREAGH Just here suits me very well.

Beat.

WADDINGTON Ever had someone like me before?

CASTLEREAGH Can't say I have, no.

CASTLEREAGH *reaches out to grab WADDINGTON, but he dodges.*

WADDINGTON Aren't we in a hurry.

CASTLEREAGH Are we here to have a conversation?

WADDINGTON But we must deal with the financials first, dear man. You didn't think I was providing a free service, did you?

CASTLEREAGH So that's how it's to be. What do you want?

WADDINGTON Twenty pounds should cover it nicely, duckie.

CASTLEREAGH I'll not pay more than five. Take it or leave it.

WADDINGTON Not even for an exotic speciality? All right, shall we settle on ten?

CASTLEREAGH Disgusting creature. Come here.

WADDINGTON The pony first, my squirrel. In my hand.

CASTLEREAGH produces a wallet and takes out the money, handing it to WADDINGTON. He undoes his trousers.

WADDINGTON What would you like me to do?

CASTLEREAGH I'd like you to shut up. Do you hear? Keep your mouth shut.

He grabs WADDINGTON.

BET steps out into the light.

BET Well, if it isn't Viscount Castlereagh. What a pleasant surprise.

CASTLEREAGH Huh? Who are you?

BET Oh. He doesn't know me, Waddie.

WADDINGTON How disappointing.

BET It's plain insulting, is what it is. Considering all the things I know about him.

CASTLEREAGH – what – what - ?

BET I suppose it aint surprising he's not as familiar with me as some of his colleagues, given his penchant for batting on the other side of the wicket. You might want to pull up your drawers, my lamb, while we have our little tête-a-tête.

He hastily pulls up his trousers.

CASTLEREAGH What do you think you're doing, you brutes?

WADDINGTON Now, now, Mr Castlereagh, we'll do the talking, shall we?

BET We've been working on the assumption that you don't want your private and personal activities to be generally known, in the government, say?

WADDINGTON Or in the country at large, for that matter.

CASTLEREAGH You won't get away with this.

BET I think we will.

CASTLEREAGH You never learn, do you. No-one listens to people like you. Now let me pass. You can keep my money, you dissolute wretch. Buy yourself some food and lodging.

BET Under normal circumstances, he'd probably be right, wouldn't he, Waddie?

WADDINGTON He would, Bet. If your services weren't so popular with senior politicians. On both sides of the House.

CASTLEREAGH *hesitates.*

CASTLEREAGH What is it you want? Money, is it?

BET What do we want? Do we want something, Waddie?

WADDINGTON Nothing much really. Just a word in your perfectly formed little ear.

CASTLEREAGH Well?

WADDINGTON There's a chap named Willie Bonus we'd quite like to trace the whereabouts of, amongst other things.

CASTLEREAGH I see. Wrapped up in that nest of vipers, are you? They deserved to die. And you'll soon follow them.

WADDINGTON You haven't answered the question.

CASTLEREAGH That lily-livered jackanape. He begged to go to America, so I sent him to an address I know. He's probably still there, shivering under a bed.

He takes a card from his wallet and gives it to them.

CASTLEREAGH Is that all?

BET Of course not. Aren't you enjoying our company?

CASTLEREAGH You people are monsters, preying on the misfortunes of others. Is it my fault I am the way I am?

WADDINGTON On the contrary my dear fellow.

BET The way you are sits perfectly well with us.

WADDINGTON We are not finding fault.

BET It's you who seems to be unhappy with the way you are.

WADDINGTON You're the one who finds it horrible. Not us.

CASTLEREAGH *struggles.*

CASTLEREAGH I am a God-fearing man. I tell you, I'm a good man. I love my wife.

WADDINGTON We don't doubt it.

Beat.

BET There's a friend of ours in jail, awaiting transportation.

WADDINGTON To Sierra Leone, as it happens.

BET Who would force a woman into marriage and pack her off to certain death?

CASTLEREAGH This is Sidmouth's jurisdiction. I don't have the powers of the Home Secretary.

BET A word from you will be enough. You're on the Privy Council.

CASTLEREAGH Is that all you want?

BET A little dosh wouldn't go amiss, would it, Waddie?

WADDIE It would not, Bet.

CASTLEREAGH You shits will be hounding me all my life.

BET Possibly.

WADDINGTON But a little bit of money goes a long way where we come from.

CASTLEREAGH *empties his wallet.*

WADDINGTON Shall we let him go?

BET We could. For the moment.

WADDINGTON You can go now, Lord Castlereagh. You have been most helpful.
Don't forget us, will you?

BET I don't think there's much chance of that, Waddie. Off you trot, then.

CASTLEREAGH *exits.*

WADDINGTON I'd say that went rather well, wouldn't you, Bet?

BET Quickest buck of your whole life, Waddington.

BILLY Don't you mean the quickest fuck?

WADDINGTON Come on, I'll stand you a drink.

BET Aren't we going to say goodbye?

WADDINGTON Oh, they haven't seen the last of us.

BET We're going back to where we came from. For now.

BILLY But we'll see you soon.

WADDINGTON Don't forget us, will you, ladies and gents.

ALL 3 Hark, hark, the dogs do bark,
The beggars are coming to town,
Some in rags and some in tags,
And some in silken gowns.

Some gave them white bread,
And some gave them brown,
Some gave them a good horse-whip,
And sent them out of town.

They exit.

CASTLEREAGH *enters.*

He takes out a knife and slits his throat.

3.4 *Free Women of Dominica Bathing in a Stream*: Troubling Reminders

Rage cannot be hidden, it can only be dissembled. This dissembling deludes the thoughtless, and strengthens rage and adds, to rage, contempt. [...] No black man can hope ever to be entirely liberated from this internal warfare – rage, dissembling, and contempt having inevitably accompanied his first realization of the power of white men. What is crucial here is that, since white men represent in the black man’s world so heavy a weight, white men have for black men a reality which is far from being reciprocal; and hence all black men have toward all white men an attitude which is designed, really, either to rob the white man of the jewel of his naïveté, or else to make it cost him dear.⁶²

The third play in the trilogy presented in this thesis, *Free Women of Dominica Bathing in a Stream*, stages a modern-day collision between a descendant of the enslaved and a descendant of slave-holders. The mixed-race protagonist Daniel, whose mother is threatened with deportation to Dominica, confronts his counterpart Robyn, whose ancestors owned numerous plantations in the Caribbean. In this attempt to map the legacies of slavery and abolition onto the lives of British people living now, both characters are forced into an exploration of racialised categories and their effects on hierarchies of power. James Baldwin’s memorable exegesis on the Black man’s anger from ‘A Stranger in the Village’, quoted above, remains prescient for a generation still contending with explorations of subjectivity and representation in the cultural and political theatre of today’s society. Although Baldwin was examining dialectical relationships in the context of the African-American presence in the United States, Black Atlantic scholar Jay Garcia signals that this view of racialised social relations as based in power is still applicable where those relations’ most significant and dramatic dimension lies in the psychological forces they generate, and in the ways these forces in turn affect history. As Garcia terms it: ‘Baldwin transports rage, a subject in psychological studies of prejudice, into the realm of historical forces.’⁶³ Garcia also argues that Baldwin’s essay ‘makes clear that white identity, or whiteness, is a pivotal subject in any investigation of racial ideology.’⁶⁴

In *Free Women of Dominica*, both Daniel and Robyn are forced into consideration of how the impositions and animations of ‘race’ have impacted on their subjectivity. Both have to contend with Daniel’s anger and its consequences. According to Baldwin: ‘The rage of the disesteemed is personally fruitless, but it is also absolutely inevitable; [...] Rage can only with difficulty, and never entirely, be brought under the domination of the intelligence and is therefore not susceptible to any arguments

⁶² Baldwin, p. 165.

⁶³ Garcia, Jay, *Psychology Comes to Harlem: Re-thinking the Race Question in Twentieth Century America*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2012), p. 158.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

whatever.’⁶⁵ These thoughts from Baldwin provide a catalyst to the emotional currency of the stage play, the central premise of which brings the question of reparations for slavery into direct personal focus. The characters embody a number of contemporary debates around the racialised legacies of slavery, including that of the guilt / shame dialectic, which is partly played out through a discussion of the appropriacy and scope of offering apologies. During one of their meetings they hold the following exchange:

- Robyn** You can’t hold me accountable for the past, Daniel. None of that was done in my name. I can apologise if you want me to, but what difference would it make? It wouldn’t be sincere.
- Daniel** Did I ask you to apologise?
- Robyn** Even if I said sorry, would I still owe you? Could I go right back to doing what I was doing before?
- Daniel** Good point.
- Robyn** And what would you do with my apology? How would it help you? Forgiveness has to be a choice. You’d have to have the option not to forgive.⁶⁶

This raises questions of accountability that have been circulating for many years in public discourse but have acquired a new urgency in the light of recent events. Daniel does not require an apology; instead he demands reparations, in the form of the eponymous painting which forms the historical, aesthetic and metaphorical heart of the play.

The research for *Free Women of Dominica* required several forms of enquiry. My attempts to trace the legacies of slavery in Britain led not only to a study of the history of Dominica, but also to a detailed analysis of the impact of the rhetoric of abolitionism – and anti-abolitionism – on public discourse and the formation of nationhood, from the eighteenth century to the present day. Before summarising these investigations and their impact on the play, I will conduct a brief survey of contemporary discourses of slavery and abolition as they relate to cultural products, public memory and commemorations in Britain.

Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace has drawn attention to one of the central ironies of historical storytelling in film and theatre, which is that the visual plenitude and aesthetic beauty of many productions introduces an element of pleasure that mitigates against deeper consideration of the issues

⁶⁵ Baldwin, p. 165.

⁶⁶ *Free Women of Dominica Bathing in a Stream*, p. 286.

at hand. She notes that costume dramas set in the era of slavery can be ‘beautiful and compelling and make us love the setting that produced the slave trade.’⁶⁷ It becomes possible to watch such productions without being disturbed, either by troubling reminders of the material conditions of slavery, or by any rehearsal of the fundamental ethical and historiographical debates that underpin post-colonial rewritings of the narratives of slavery and abolition. Following the extensive public celebrations of the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in Britain in 2007, the slavery historian James Walvin reflected on the rationale for the breadth and depth of the commemorations, including the numerous cultural and creative outputs that were forthcoming. He picked out a number of key factors. Noting the surge of public interest and blanket coverage of the issue on almost every platform, Walvin commented that: ‘It is hard to think of a comparable historical anniversary attracting such ubiquitous, wide-ranging cultural and social attention. Quite why this happened remains perplexing: what is/was so special about abolition?’⁶⁸ Walvin’s essay concluded that, amongst other things, congruence with many modern-day political issues was one reason for the mass participation. These factors alone, however, could not entirely account for the genuine groundswell of public interest; it appeared to Walvin that ‘there was a growing appreciation, [...] that the enslaved Atlantic was central not merely to the Americas or Africa – but to Britain itself’.⁶⁹ This realisation, he contended:

Struck a chord in the often confusing debate about “identity”. Older, popular images of a benign British empire which brought the blessings of freedom to all corners of the world seemed hugely tarnished when set alongside the history of slavery and the slave trade.⁷⁰

This notion that British public discourse in recent decades has incorporated more explicit linkages between slavery and metropolitan British life is disputed by Diana Paton, who maintains that white British self-congratulation and pride dominated the most visible responses to the bicentenary.⁷¹ She quotes the view of Conservative MP Malcolm Moss: ‘[w]e should be thankful for, and celebrate wholeheartedly, the fact that it was our country that produced the moral giants of their time [...] who [...] changed society fundamentally and irreversibly for the better’, adding that his speech ‘struck a note that was frequently heard during the year.’⁷² Paton argues that in telling stories about slavery, it is all too easy for a teleological story of slavery-into-freedom to slip ‘from the pages of history into museum galleries, school curricula and political speeches.’⁷³ She continues:

⁶⁷ Wallace, p. 178.

⁶⁸ James Walvin, ‘The Slave Trade, Abolition and Public Memory’, 144.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁷¹ Paton, ‘Interpreting the Bicentenary’, 278.

⁷² Speech by Malcolm Moss, House of Commons, Hansard, 20 March 2007, 742. Quoted in *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 279.

Other stories, which emphasise the damage done by enslavement, the problematic outcomes of antislavery governmental action and the power relations that remained in place after slavery in its Atlantic form was left behind have proved much harder to present as public history, yet are at least as significant.⁷⁴

Moreover, as historian Katie Donington and her colleagues point out in their 2016 study of Britain's history and memory of transatlantic slavery, even when more nuanced accounts of empire enter into public discourse, the theme remains a contentious issue that is subject to political expediency. They cite the example of the Labour government's decision post-2007 to 'include the topic [of slavery] as a compulsory part of the national curriculum, followed by its subsequent removal by the coalition government under Conservative Education Secretary Michael Gove.'⁷⁵

In the creative industries, Paton's notion of a reductive storytelling mode does appear to be borne out by cultural products. The BBC's 'Abolition Season' was a range of programmes and content across television, radio and online.⁷⁶ Film scholar Ross Wilson, in his analysis of its content, argues that the 'media memories' that stem from this diet of programmes are mainly ones of displacement. He detects in the programmes 'a concern not to confront the perceivably potentially damaging and disrupting memory of the transatlantic slave trade'⁷⁷ This is to some extent inevitable: it is understandably more straightforward to commemorate collective achievements than collective shame. The refusal in late 2019 of the British government to fund a £4m bronze statue in Hyde Park depicting the history of slavery is a case in point. Recent governments have supported memorials to both soldiers lost in World War I and the massacre of Bosnian Muslims at Srebrenica in 1995. Theresa May's government promised an additional £25m for a new Holocaust memorial and learning centre, bringing its state funding to £75m.⁷⁸ With no such remembrance of the victims of Britain's slave trading past, it is hard not to conclude that the coherence with which Britons can articulate regret at other nations' perpetration of atrocities is not mirrored in acknowledgement of their own.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Ibid. Paton cites the consistently positive descriptions of the impact of the 1807 Act on parts of Africa, at the expense of serious research into its negative effects on that continent.

⁷⁵ *Britain's History and Memory of Transatlantic Slavery: Local Nuances of a National Sin*, ed. by Katie Donington, Ryan Hanley and Jessica Moody (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), p. 9.

⁷⁶ 'The season sets out to tell the stories of the forgotten heroes – the women and men who helped drive the spirit and action of the Abolition movement that eventually led to emancipation decades later – and to bring to life a story that still affects our lives in Britain today.' From http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/press_releases/stories/2007/02_february/20_abolition.shtml

⁷⁷ Ross Wilson, 'Remembering to forget? - the BBC abolition season and media memory of Britain's transatlantic slave trade', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (2008), 391-403. (p. 401).

⁷⁸ In 2008 Boris Johnson endorsed the proposal, saying that Hyde Park was "a fitting site for a permanent memorial to the millions who lost their lives". In November 2019 Johnson's government refused funding, causing planning permission to lapse and threatening the future of the memorial project. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/10/slave-trade-memorial-charity-uk-government-refusal-of-funding-boris-johnson>.

⁷⁹ However, 2007 also saw the welcome inauguration of a slavery museum in Liverpool.

Paton argues that the confluence of reasons that fed into the inordinate focus on abolition in 2007 mirrored the original mixture of arguments for the abolition of the slave trade in the early nineteenth century. The argument for political utility, she asserts (as opposed to a rationale based on virtue), was one justification that was re-circulating in 2007.⁸⁰ ‘Two hundred years after 1807’, she writes:

The British government was again trying to persuade both the British population and the international community of Britain’s moral virtue, in the context of an unpopular war. As in the period of the Napoleonic wars, civil liberties have been sacrificed on grounds of national security needs.⁸¹

Paton refers here to the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States-led coalition. British Prime Minister Tony Blair wrote that the anniversary of abolition was ‘a chance for all of us to deepen understanding of our heritage, celebrate the richness of our diversity and increase our determination to shape the world with the values we share.’⁸² This rhetoric reveals a political desire for the bicentenary to be seen in the popular imagination as a template for the active propagation of ‘British values’. It also portrays the anniversary not as an opportunity to learn from the nation’s past participation in genocide, but as a celebration of the victory of British historical virtue, in an action where all sections of society came together to espouse anti-slavery discourse as the inevitable manifestation of national merit. Therefore, despite James Walvin’s assertion that the bicentenary prompted British people to meditate on the fact that the ‘enslaved Atlantic was central [...] to Britain itself’,⁸³ it seems doubtful that this association has yet put down any firm roots in political, commemorative and mainstream creative discourses. Moreover, Emma Waterton et al, in their assessment of the creative and commemorative products that emerged from the bicentenary, argue that:

Forgetfulness such as this significantly affects Britain’s ability to reflect, collectively and self-consciously, on both its past and its present. This is particularly apparent when considering the inheritance of residual racism, and a raft of associated social and political problems, which are the legacies of Britain’s pre-eminent role in the enslavement of African people.⁸⁴

It is this connection between the legacies of slavery, abolition and race relations in Britain today that *Free Women of Dominica* hopes to treat, literally embodying the ‘troubling reminders’ that Wallace calls attention to above.

⁸⁰ The argument for political utility can be found in Robin Blackburn’s *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*, discussed in 0.1.

⁸¹ Paton, ‘Interpreting the Bicentenary’, 282.

⁸² Calendar of Events, 2007, Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, published by the Dept for Communities and local government. Quoted in Walvin, ‘The Slave Trade, Abolition and Public Memory’, 145.

⁸³ Walvin, ‘The Slave Trade, Abolition and Public Memory’, 147.

⁸⁴ Waterton et al., 33.

The ‘forgetfulness’ referred to by Waterton et al arises from a complex intersection of factors, not least the dominance of discourses of abolition and British ‘honour’ that began, as discussed previously, with Thomas Clarkson’s first History.⁸⁵ His and subsequent Histories’ foregrounding of the impressive abolitionist rhetoric of Wilberforce and his colleagues has arguably made a significant contribution to some of the prevailing constructions of the British national character in public discourse since Victorian times. A closer look at late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Parliamentary rhetoric, however, reveals some intriguing similarities between the arguments of the anti-slavery lobby and those of their opponents on the pro-slavery side. This apparent coherence in the rhetoric of both camps is borne out by the work of scholar Srividhya Swaminathan, whose 2009 study *Debating the Slave Trade* is a decade-by-decade examination of Parliamentary ‘cross-talk’. Swaminathan concludes that the ‘performance’ of Britishness was practised by both sides of the argument. Abolitionists and proslavery advocates shaped and informed each-other’s arguments in significant ways, generating a more sophisticated sense of national identity and character than many researchers have previously understood.⁸⁶ She argues that:

Each group developed its vision of the Briton to further political, social, and certainly economic agendas. In the later stages of the debates, the rhetorical terrain of national identity became the most common backdrop for abolitionist and proslavery opinions.⁸⁷

One of the principal historical characters in *Free Women of Dominica* is my ancestor Sir William Young, Member of Parliament and vocal opponent of William Wilberforce’s bills to outlaw the slave trade.⁸⁸ Young’s speeches rehearse the well-known arguments against withdrawing from the slave trade, such as damage to Britain’s commercial interests, and worsening conditions for the enslaved.⁸⁹ He espouses the regulationist argument,⁹⁰ whilst portraying the sympathies of abolitionists as misplaced, questioning their commitment to bettering the lives of all Britons.⁹¹ Much of Young’s argumentation, however, is occupied with notions of justice and humanity, and their intersection with nationhood. He

⁸⁵ See 0.1. These discourses were perpetuated by the Victorians and continue to this day with the veneration of figures such as William Wilberforce.

⁸⁶ Srividhya Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade: Rhetoric of British National Identity, 1759–1815*. (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 205.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁸⁸ Young was M.P. for St Mawes from 1784-1806, and Buckingham from 1806-1807. He was also governor of Tobago from 1807-1815.

⁸⁹ See William Young, *The Speech of Sir William Young, Bart. Delivered in Parliament on the subject of the slave trade, April 19th 1791* (London: John Stockdale, 1791). This version is used here in conjunction with Cobbett’s *The Parliamentary History of England*.

⁹⁰ The ‘regulationist’ argument was espoused by many pro-slavery advocates, plantation owners and investors in the colonies. It relied on tighter regulation of the trade and improvements to governance, and was an important contributor to anti-abolitionist victories in Parliament.

⁹¹ This is another common trope, explored more fully in section 0.5. Srividhya Swaminathan points out that pro-slavery advocates’ re-directing of attention to ‘poor whites’ was not because they sought to ‘reform the class structure of British society. Their purpose was not to improve the lives of the lower classes in the mother country but to highlight the unrealistic arguments advanced by those who claimed to speak for “humanity.”’ Swaminathan, p. 197.

distances himself from support of the slave trade *per se*, claiming that Britain's withdrawal from it would only aggravate the miseries of the enslaved.⁹² Seeking to characterise the pro-slavery argument as equally, or more, humanitarian than the abolitionist position, Young declares that 'far from crowding philanthropy out of sight [...], I studiously bring it to view.'⁹³ Using an idiom almost indistinguishable from Wilberforce's own, he invokes Britain as a humanitarian exemplar, in such exhortations as:

Instead of withdrawing from the trade Great Britain should give example of new sentiments, of new policy, and awaken original principles of justice and of nature and thus eventually legislate for the world, and be indeed the imperial benefactress of mankind.⁹⁴

The similarities with abolitionist arguments such as: 'Wherever the sun shines, let us go round the world with him diffusing our beneficence', are obvious.⁹⁵ Both Young and Wilberforce couch their arguments in terms of national prosperity and the public good; both conjure an enlightened, humane white Briton, shadowed by a colonised 'other', thus setting the tone for a commitment to world leadership, and according to Swaminathan, presaging the nineteenth-century imperial mission by illustrating the rationale used to translate British empire-building into "beneficence".⁹⁶

Through the character of Young, I wanted to expose the less-obvious parallels between him and his counterpart, Wilberforce, by scripting a confrontation between the two men that attempts to dissolve some of the boundaries between antagonist and protagonist. My aim here, as in the case of Wilberforce's appearance in *Glorious Causes*, was to contribute to the dismantling of some of the misconceptions about the Yorkshire politician – such as the idea that he was anything other than politically and personally conservative – thus countering the dominant depictions described above. The following riposte to one of Young's accusations in the play paraphrases some of Wilberforce's actual pronouncements on both women and the 'African', as well as his rejection of radical politics:

⁹² He assures the house that slavery 'rests on principles repugnant to the temper of my mind. I would that it had never begun – I wish that it may soon terminate.' Young, *Speech*, p. 30.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 34. The pro-slavery 'humanity' argument was often linked with the idea of justice to one's fellow Englishmen. Bryan Edwards, a powerful lobbyist, declared: 'I have as much of the milk of human kindness in my nature as any man living; but I have no idea of that humanity which is contrary to honesty and justice.' Edwards, *A speech delivered*, in Kitson, Vol. 2, p. 331. Another MP enthuses that 'the most exalted characters, those heroes, the ornament and pride of their country, and who had been employed in the colonies, [...] bore testimony to the mild and lenient treatment of slaves in the West Indies. Hansard, 27 February 1807, Vol. 8, 1042 (unknown MP).

⁹⁴ Cobbett, *Parliamentary History*, Vol 29, 295-6.

⁹⁵ Wilberforce, in *Ibid.*, Vol. 28, 61. Another example of these sentiments can be found in a letter to Wilberforce's constituents: 'Let it also be remembered that, on the one hand, no nation has plunged so deeply into this guilt as Great Britain; on the other, that none could be so likely to be looked up to as an example, if she should be the first decidedly to renounce it.' William Wilberforce, *A Letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade: Addressed to the Freeholders and Other Inhabitants of Yorkshire*, Vol. 1 (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1807), p. 311.

⁹⁶ Swaminathan, p. 180. She argues that this overlap in argumentation reflects the fact that Britain in the 1790s was 'at a crossroads of understanding itself as a cohesive nation and its place in the world.' *Ibid.*, p. 210. The abolitionist challenge to the status quo had forced Parliamentarians to 'come up with more convincing reasons why certain kinds of "ownership" should be tolerated.' *Ibid.*, p. 207.

Wilberforce I have never been for the immediate abolition of slavery. Do not confuse me with those clamorous women daily beating down the door of parliament. I have always maintained that the poor African must be gradually trained, that he may become an obedient peasant. Besides, I am no radical.⁹⁷

Thus Wilberforce behaves metonymically in the play to puncture the sense of national pride in abolition that the character of Daniel objects to so forcibly in a later scene, declaring: ‘Ah yes. Abolition. That great British act of kindness. You commit a crime for centuries, stop doing it because it’s wrong, then go on about your achievement for the next two hundred years.’⁹⁸

It is this ‘moral capital’, accrued by abolitionism that Christopher Brown refers to, in his eponymous 2006 study: an emerging imperial identity that endowed the British with a justificatory purpose for colonisation, one that was founded, as Swaminathan attests, on ‘morality and Christianity, rather than bondage and despair.’⁹⁹ The moral capital accumulated by the post-abolition white Briton, according to Brown, was a resource that could be utilised for the sake of tangible, exterior returns. Moreover, the ends to which the accumulated prestige could be mobilised, he writes, ‘need not be political ends. Moral capital can serve a variety of purposes – cultural, intellectual, social, emotional or interpersonal.’¹⁰⁰ The ‘Windrush Scandal’, which is one of the central themes in the play, embodied by the character of Janice, and her impending deportation, seeks to explore the terrible consequences of the absorption, dissemination and perpetuation of this imperial paradigm. Legislators of a twenty-first century society which continues to define itself according to these terms, whilst simultaneously neglecting to address many of the potent legacies of empire and colonisation, will inevitably treat some of its most vulnerable members in the shameful manner brought to light during this episode.

⁹⁷ *Free Women of Dominica*, p. 254. Young and Wilberforce also share a fear of slave revolt in the West Indies, such as the revolution in Saint Domingue (now Haiti), both mobilising this spectre in their respective arguments, as did many MPs in both camps. Seymour Drescher’s empirical study *People and Parliament*, in which he literally tallies up the number of times each ‘reason’ for abolition is cited in the Commons or Lords, reveals the number of ‘security’ citations amounts to a figure almost as high as the top category, entitled ‘Humanity, inhumanity.’ Seymour Drescher, ‘People and Parliament: The Rhetoric of the British Slave Trade’, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (Spring, 1990), 561-580 (p. 570).

⁹⁸ *Free Women of Dominica*, p. 277.

⁹⁹ Swaminathan, p. 213.

¹⁰⁰ Brown, p. 457.

Free Women of Dominica Bathing in a Stream

by Mags Chalcraft-Islam

Characters

(Doubling can be used)

The Chorus: *played by everyone*

Daniel (30s): *A mixed-race T.V. advertising executive*

Robyn (30s): *A white human rights lawyer*

Janice: *Daniel's mother, born in Dominica*

Margot (teens): *Robyn's mother*

Agostina Brunias: *Daniel's 6x great grandmother*

Sir William Young, 2nd Baronet: *Robyn's 6x great grandfather*

William Wilberforce: *A politician*

Bunc: *an enslaved young man*

Prologue

The CHORUS. A dash indicates a new speaker.

- Have pity on Christopher Columbus, lost in the Atlantic Ocean
- All he wanted was to reach India
- Find some gold, trade a few spices
- And he ended up in the Bahamas
- Encircled by the Taino, the Ciguayo and the Macorix
- And those vicious cannibals, the Kalinago
- Visitors to their islands do not come back. It follows that they have been eaten
- Is it any wonder that he vows to stamp them out?
- In less than one life's journey, a million souls are swept into a cloth and wrung
- Until the land drinks blood
- Yet some escape. They fly across the sea and break on a rock
- Wai'tukubuli is her name. The gatekeeper of the Caribbean. *Tall is her body*
- Dominica to you
- Columbus got bored of all that naming. A new island for every day of the week
- Subsequent visitors are anything but bored. They are showered with arrows, peppering their arses
- So they avoid Sunday Island for a while. Her forests teem with savages, her sides are too steep to grow their favourite crop
- Sugar. Its sickly stink reaches to the fringes of the earth
- Its boiling-house fires will burn up bodies for centuries

— Yet in this crucible, other stories are born. Each one is a knot in the rope that joins all beginnings and endings

— A rope whose loops take in every one of us

— There is no-one here who is not a character in this story. We are all a part of it.

Scene I

1980s. MARGOT, *a heavily pregnant teenager*.

Margot Aaaaaaaaargh! Someone help me! For fuck's sake, anyone!

JANICE, *a young midwife, enters*.

Janice What is it?

Margot I want to see the doctor! Something's wrong.

Janice You've just seen him, darlin.

Margot Who the fuck are you?

Janice I'm your midwife. I'm going to help you get that baby out.

Margot No you bloody well are not.

Janice You want it to stay in there, do you?

Margot I don't want it. I never wanted it. It's fucking killing me. Oh, it's coming! I can feel it.

Janice It's just a contraction, darlin. Look at me.

JANICE *places MARGOT'S hands on her shoulders*.

Janice Look at me! In my eyes. Good. Now breathe with me. That's it. In and out. Breathe. In. And out. Good. Good girl. Brilliant.

MARGOT *obeys. She breathes, moans, then comes out the other side*.

Janice That wasn't so bad, was it?

Margot It was horrible.

Janice What's your name?

Margot Margot.

Janice I'm Janice. You're going to be just fine. Have you been timing your contractions?

Margot I don't know.

Janice I need to fetch your notes. All right?

JANICE goes. MARGOT has a contraction.

Margot Nurse! It's coming again. Janice, come back! Oh god, oh god, breathe, breathe, how did I get myself into this? I wish I'd stayed at school and done my A levels!

JANICE returns with the notes.

Janice You've had no check-ups, girl. Where are you registered?

Margot I don't know.

Janice Is anyone with you? Any family we can call?

Margot I don't want them here. This wasn't exactly the plan.

Janice All right. I need to feel your tummy, darlin.

JANICE examines her.

Margot I'm terrified.

Janice It's natural to be scared.

Margot Ow – what are you doing?

Janice Listen to me. The baby is breach. Do you know what that means? The baby is upside down.

Margot Upside down!

Janice It's all right. It happens. But it could mean a caesarean section.

Margot I don't care, just get it out.

Janice (*beat*) Doctor Snow's policy is to let labour go on as long as possible.

Margot What kind of sadist is he?

JANICE *makes a wry face.*

Janice (*imitates*) Surely you approve of natural birth, Nurse Charles? Aren't you people closer to nature than the rest of us?

Margot Stop it, you're making me laugh. Argh, what's happening?

A gush as the waters break. JANICE grabs a towel.

Margot Is it the baby?

Janice It's your waters breaking. It's a good sign, darlin.

JANICE *inspects the towel. Her manner changes.*

Janice I need to fetch the doctor.

Margot What is it? Janice?

Janice It's all right, darlin. But I must go for the doctor.

Margot Please don't go. I'm sorry. Please stay with me.

JANICE *exits. MARGOT screams. And screams.*

Scene 2

2018. JANICE, *now around 60, surrounded by papers.*

Daniel What's all this?

Janice Just paperwork, you know. Saw your ad on the telly, Daniel. Aren't you clever. Sainsbury's.

Daniel B and Q.

Janice Course it was. They're both orange, aren't they. So proud of you, darlin.

He picks up a piece of paper.

Daniel This stuff's all online these days. You need to catch up, mum.

Janice It's the older ones I'm after. If I had a passport...

Daniel You must have a passport.

Janice You ever known me to go abroad? You may have been all over the world, but I've been working, day after day, year after year, to pay for your education.

Daniel Yeah, yeah.

Janice What else have I got to prove I'm a citizen?

Daniel A citizen?

Janice It's a new rule, you've got to show your passport.

He stares at her.

Daniel Is something going on at work?

She doesn't reply.

Daniel Am I missing something? Have you lost your job? How long?

Janice A few weeks.

Daniel They can't do that.

Janice They had no choice. It was the Home Office.

Daniel There's been a mistake.

Janice It's no mistake, darlin.

Daniel Did you say Home Office? What the fuck have they got to do with it?

Janice Language, Daniel. They want to send me back.

Daniel Back where?

Janice I been looking for the proof. I went to my school in Hackney but it was made into flats. I spoke to a guy there, he looked at me like I was -

Daniel No, no, that kind of thing doesn't happen here, mum.

Janice I wasn't born here, was I?

Daniel You've lived here your whole life. Has the world gone totally fucking mental?

Janice Language, Daniel. I told you, I got no proof.

Daniel How long has this been going on? Why didn't you tell me?

Janice You think I can't sort out my own problems?

Beat.

Daniel You've worked, you've paid your taxes, you've never done anything –

Janice I – got – no – proof! You're not listening, Daniel. I haven't got the paperwork. You haven't got the paperwork, you're out on your ear. Do you understand that?

Beat.

Daniel You must have something. Let me have a look.

He starts shifting through papers.

Janice I'm going to make a cup of tea.

Scene 3

— Jeannot Rolle, Dominica's founding father, a free black man, sails in one day and plants a cross

— The Kalinago chop it down

— He builds another

— They burn it down

- He builds another, made of stone. It stands there to this day
- Weathering war and conquest, talk and treaties, betrayal and blood
- Even the arrival of the British Crown, in the shape of new governor Sir William Young
- 1st Baronet
- Who loses no time in carving up the place. His energy is boundless
- His charm remarkable. An island is named after him, and a fort
- Now a luxury hotel, should you want to visit
- He helps himself to nine plantations, takes ownership of 896 African souls
- But Sir William is no mercenary. He's a man of culture
- He likes to make a jovial party of colonisation
- One must promote the arts, even amid barbarity
- The baronet imports his culture whole, bringing his own Italian painter
- Agostino Brunias, to shine light into the darkest corners
- But Sir William soon tires of savages. He ups and travels back to England, abandoning the painter, brush in hand. Within a few short years, he dies
- A very civilised death, leaving all he owns to his son, Sir William Young
- 2nd Baronet
- Member of Parliament, classical scholar, and staunch opponent of the abolition of slavery

Enter SIR WILLIAM YOUNG 2nd BARONET, with WILLIAM WILBERFORCE.

Young Commiserations, Mr Wilberforce, on the defeat of another bill. You seem to be making a habit of it.

Wilberforce Rome was not built in a day, Sir William. But there is one thing I rarely lose at. Come and join me at the table.

WILBERFORCE *produces a bottle of whisky, two glasses and a deck of cards.*

Young I'm afraid I'm not a betting man, Mr Wilberforce.

Wilberforce But you won't refuse to play? If your performance in the House today was anything to go by, I'll wager you play with pluck.

WILBERFORCE *pours out whisky.*

Young Pluck? If there is any pluck to speak of, I rather think it is on your side.

Wilberforce Come along, man. Let's not stand on ceremony. Your very good health.

YOUNG *takes a glass and they drink.*

Young Frankly, I am astonished that you play at all, with the odds so heavily stacked against you.

WILBERFORCE *shuffles the pack.*

Young Any attempt to outlaw the importation of African Negroes into the colonies is hopeless. Everything and everyone opposes you.

Wilberforce Everything and everyone apart from God, justice and humanity. Why do you think we lost America, Sir William?

Young Now that's an interesting question. I believe there were a number of significant –

Wilberforce It's simple. We angered Providence. We were too greedy.

WILBERFORCE *cuts the pack.*

Young Again, your superstition surprises me. You will talk of Lady Luck next.

Wilberforce We must win back Providence if we are to prosper as a nation. This is for the trump. *(shows the card)* Hearts.

Young How fitting for one who displays such passion for the cause. I told you, I do not play, Mr Wilberforce.

WILBERFORCE *puts down the pack.*

Wilberforce Providence must be propitiated. Call it luck or superstition if it makes you feel better. *(pause)* Forgive me, I forget who you represent?

Young St Mawes.

Wilberforce In Cornwall? Ah yes, I hear it was once a thriving port. Sadly, not much remains besides the smell of rotting fish.

Young I hope you're not implying what I think you are.

Wilberforce Far be it from me to suggest anyone holds a borough in their pocket. Though I have heard of an uninhabited hill in Wiltshire that returns two MPs to Parliament. A pity the same cannot be said of my own constituency of Yorkshire. I'd have a lot less work to do.

Young It must be distressing not to give your people the attention they deserve. I hear there are children working in the cotton mills who wish their skin turned black, so that Mr Wilberforce might cast his sympathetic eye on them.

Wilberforce You are much mistaken if you think I care more for the blacks than my own fellows, Young.

Young Quite the contrary. Your great campaign to reform the manners of society is well-known. There's no-one more zealous in stamping out drinking and gambling in the lower orders. If your concern does not extend to those with incomes over a thousand a year, it must be because no such vices exist among the rich.

Wilberforce Don't tell me you lose sleep over the poor, Sir William? Are you perhaps anxious to reform society, so that some of what we enjoy might be extended to the lower classes?

Young I don't give a fiddle about the poor. But nor do I care about their bad manners. I am simply offering some friendly advice. The beam of light you send out into the world in the name of humanity may soon fall upon injustices nearer to home. Then where would you stand with your mill-owning friends?

Wilberforce You are not without interests yourself, from what I hear. Perhaps your reasons for speaking against my bill lie in your own colonial holdings?

Young I do not pretend otherwise. The first baronet left me plenty of property. Along with considerable debts. My estates are mortgaged to the hilt. Seems he loved a party. I am cut from a different cloth. Let me be honest with you, Mr Wilberforce. I dislike slavery as much as you do. I concur that the trade in men is corrupting to all good Christians. But passion will only get us so far. Arguments must be based in fact and reason. You know very well if we withdraw from the trade the Americans and French will take it up with gusto. I believe we can conduct it with more humanity than they.

Wilberforce You seek to persuade me that your concern is for the blacks?

Young Enough to prevent their overnight release into penury and debauchery.

Wilberforce I can assure you that is not my aim. I have never been for the immediate abolition of slavery. Do not confuse me with those clamorous women daily beating down the door of parliament. The poor African must be gradually trained, to become an obedient peasant. Besides, I am no radical.

YOUNG *raises his glass.*

Young That is something we can drink to. (*drinks*) I must thank you sincerely for your help.

Wilberforce I have influenced you?

Young You have helped me clarify something. I've been toying with the idea of a visit to my overseas property. I'd like to see for myself how my negroes are treated. You have made me see that I must go at once.

Wilberforce I am glad to have inspired you. You will discover for yourself the full horror of that iniquitous system.

Young You *have* inspired me, Mr Wilberforce. To collect all the evidence I will need to bury your slave trade bill once and for all.

Scene 4

JANICE, DANIEL *and* ROBYN.

ROBYN's office is stylish and minimal. An 18th-century oil painting hangs prominently on the wall: five semi-naked women, sitting, standing and washing in a rock-strewn stream. Their skin-tones range from pale to dark brown. The setting is the West Indies but the landscape is classical. The women are shapely and elegant; some wear headscarves. The drapery is carefully-positioned.

Robyn I'm sorry if you've had a wasted trip, Mrs Charles, but you might be better off looking elsewhere.

Daniel You don't do immigration? That's not what it says on your website.

Robyn We may not be best-placed to help. You need to find the right place for your mother.

Daniel So you won't take the case?

Robyn I didn't say that. I need to know more about it.

Daniel Fine. What do you want to know?

Robyn *(beat)* Mrs Charles, are you aware that you may not be eligible for legal aid? The costs can be pretty high.

Janice Well, I –

Daniel How much?

Robyn I can't put an exact figure on it – but it mounts up, I'm afraid.

Daniel We talking thousands? Tens of thousands?

Robyn When the Home Office is involved, it always drags on.

Daniel You think we can't afford it.

Janice Daniel!

Robyn Of course not. I want you to know what you're letting yourself in for.

Daniel Perhaps you'd like to see my bank statements?

Janice Tsk!

Robyn I'm sure that won't be necessary.

Pause.

Daniel Nice place. Not like in the films. Shabby office, harassed lawyer, people banging down the door.

Robyn You've been watching too much TV, Mr Charles. We do our absolute best for the people we help.

Janice I'm sure you do.

Robyn We have a high success rate.

Daniel I know. That's why we're here.

Robyn What do you do, Mr Charles?

Janice He works in advertising. Television.

Daniel Must be why I watch too much of it.

Robyn *(beat)* How about you explain your situation, Mrs Charles? Tell me a bit about yourself.

Janice I've lived here since I was six months old. I've worked all my life.

Daniel My grandmother brought her over from Dominica when she was a baby. Are we paying for this, by the way?

Robyn You don't pay anything until I decide to take you on as a client.

Janice I'm a midwife. Worked in most of the hospitals in London, over the years.

Robyn Any other children?

Daniel I'm all the family she's got. She fell out with my gran.

Janice Daniel, there's no need to -

Daniel She needs to know, mum.

Robyn And your son – Daniel's father? Sorry, I have to ask.

Daniel Never on the scene. Fucked off to Australia a few years ago.

Janice Tsk. What Daniel means is that –

Daniel They weren't married, if that's your next question. You know how it is, these absent white dads, walking out on their kids.

Robyn I do, as it goes. Got one of them of my own.

Daniel Oh.

Robyn So you're not in touch.

Janice He passed away. Heart attack.

Daniel Too much barbecue.

Robyn Sorry to hear that. *(beat)* What evidence have you been able to produce so far?

Janice I've got records, but they want all sorts. See, I don't have a passport, darlin. Never had time for holidays. I was always too busy working.

Daniel It's gone further than that now. This arrived.

He takes out a letter and hands it to ROBYN.

Daniel Liability for Removal.

Janice It's from the Home Office.

Robyn 'If you do not leave the United Kingdom as required you will be liable to enforced removal... If you decide to stay then your life in UK will become increasingly difficult.'

JANICE silently remonstrates with DANIEL while ROBYN scans the letter.

Robyn I'm really sorry to hear this, Mrs Charles. (*beat*) I'll be frank with you. It's a little late in the day.

Daniel Tell me about it. I had no idea this was going on.

ROBYN *looks from one to the other.*

Daniel She doesn't tell me things.

Janice It's not that. He gets angry.

Daniel Too right I get angry. With this government, with this country, with the whole neo-colonial fucking system.

Janice Daniel!

Robyn I understand. It won't help your mother though, will it?

Beat. Abruptly, he laughs.

Daniel You don't mess around, do you?

Robyn It's my job. If you hire me we need to act quickly to stop the deportation.

Daniel Is it possible?

Robyn There are some things we can try.

Daniel You could put a word in with your mates in the civil service.

Robyn Er – that's not how it works.

Daniel It's how everything works. All chums together to keep the system in place.

Janice Daniel, that's enough. He's been under a lot of strain, darlin. We both have. He doesn't mean to be rude.

Robyn Of course.

Daniel Listen, we came to you 'cause we heard you're good. We need your help. Will you take the case?

Pause.

- Robyn** I need to see everything you've got. Any paperwork at all. We could start by raising new grounds to remain. We'd have to prove that removing Mrs Charles would constitute a serious breach of her family life. She's been here so long, doesn't know anyone in Dominica, etc. It's a long shot, but it's the best we've got at the moment.
- Daniel** How about that, mum? It's good, right?
- Janice** Thank you, Miss Stewart.
- Robyn** I can't make any promises, Mrs Charles.
- Daniel** Thank you, Miss Stewart.
- Robyn** You're welcome. And please, call me Robyn.

Scene 5

JANICE and DANIEL.

- Janice** I've never been so embarrassed in my life. How could you, Daniel? *(beat)* If you think we're taking that woman on, you've got another thing coming.
- Daniel** You're joking, aren't you?
- Janice** Talking about our family like that, in front of strangers.
- Daniel** This is our only chance, mum. We have to take it.
- Janice** Not to mention the expense.
- Daniel** I don't give a shit about the money. This is more important than money.
- Janice** I didn't like her, if you want to know.
- Daniel** Fine. You don't need to like her.
- Janice** We'll find someone else.

Daniel There's no time for that, mum.

Janice That office. That picture.

Daniel What picture?

Janice You didn't see it? You couldn't miss it.

Daniel I wasn't looking at the décor, funnily enough. What was wrong with it?

Janice Shouldn't be allowed.

Daniel You're this deep in trouble, and you're worrying about pictures on the wall.

Janice Naked, exposed, fat bottoms. For all to see.

Daniel It's art, mum!

Janice I'll give you art.

Daniel God. You can be so backward sometimes.

Janice Don't you disrespect me. You have no idea what I'm talking about.

Daniel You're right there.

Janice There's a lot of things you don't know, Daniel.

Daniel I know a hell of a lot more than you.

Janice About this family. A lot of things you don't know.

Pause.

Daniel What's this family got to do with it?

Janice I should have told you before. I should have told you a long time ago.

Daniel Now you've lost me, mum.

Janice I thought it was the right thing to do at the time. I was trying to protect you. I had to make a choice.

Daniel (beat) Is this about my gran? The way you cut her out? I never understood it back then, and I still don't. What did she ever do to you?

Pause.

Daniel Mum.

Janice You really want to do this now, Daniel?

Daniel You're the one who brought it up.

Janice (beat) She suffocated me. She was so hard on me. She never stopped, my whole life - we have to live up to it, we're special. I just wanted to be like everyone else. A normal English kid. But she'd say Janice, they are over there and we are over here. I didn't want that for you. I wanted you to be free.

Daniel I don't understand – live up to what?

Janice I was supposed to be proud of it. Since when can you be proud of being a slave?

Beat.

Janice You know Danny, when you see a new-born baby, they're so fresh and new and full of hope. That's what I wanted for you. And here you are, grown up and handsome and pig-headed. (beat) Your gran calls it the bloodline. She was always waving them in front of my face. The ones who came before. The strong ones, the women who resisted through the long years of slavery, keeping hold of their stories, passing on the line through their mother's milk.

Beat.

Janice Sounds beautiful to you, I suppose. Romantic. But to me, it was a burden. All that struggle. I wanted to throw it off, Danny. I wanted a new start for us. Can you understand that?

Beat.

Janice Don't hold it against me, Danny. The past isn't always a liberation. Sometimes it's more like a ball and chain.

Scene 6

The CHORUS.

- Sir William embarks upon a tour of his West Indian estates
- St Vincent, Antigua, Tobago, Barbados
- Criss-crossing the Caribbean, for a thorough inventory of profit and loss
- In Bridge-Town he stays in a noted tavern, tastes his first avocado pear
- He doesn't like it
- But he finds the negroes very agreeable. Such a freedom of speech and wicked sense of humour
- Though the women are the proudest mortals he's ever seen
- Especially in Dominica, with its reputation for discomfort and savagery
- But Sir William must endure. He takes up residence on one of his coffee estates, to inspect the accounts, and rally the workforce.

YOUNG *sits, writing.* BUNC *runs in.*

- Young** How many times have I told you to knock, Bunc. When will you learn your manners?
- Bunc** Sorry, Massa.
- Young** Well, what is it? Have you come to deliver a message or to ogle at me?
- Bunc** Ogle, Massa?
- Young** (*beat*) The problem with coffee, Bunc, is that the returns are so poor. Sugar cane, on the other hand. Even after a loss of cattle at fifteen percent in the first year and an annual loss of negroes at ten percent, the profit margins are - but I am wasting my breath.
- Bunc** Yes, Massa.

Young What do you want?

Bunc Sorry massa, it's Miss Aggie.

Young Miss who?

AGOSTINA BRUNIAS *enters*.

Young Did you let this girl in, Bunc?

Agostina I have come to see Mr Young.

Young Sir William Young to you. Since when did servants enter my room without so much as a by-your-leave?

Agostina I need to speak to you, Sir William.

BUNC *turns to go*.

Young Bunc. If you want to stay in this house you had better learn your job.

Bunc Yes, massa. Of course, Massa.

BUNC *exits*.

Young Well, you're here now. What is your complaint, and quick about it. I will do my best to address it.

Agostina I am a slave on your estate.

Young I gathered that. What do you want from me?

Agostina They call me Aggie, though it's not my full name. I work in the coffee fields.

Young Where did you learn to talk like that?

Agostina At my father's knee.

Young A white man, I presume. Nothing special about that. They say a Creole will lay herself out for a white man. To see what profit it will bring, no doubt. Well there is no profit for you here. I think you should leave now.

Agostina You don't want to know why I came?

Young You want special treatment for being a half-breed. A position in the house, no doubt. I will think about it. I am very busy. Good day.

Beat.

Agostina Do you think it's right, Sir William, that I was born into slavery?

Young I think it neither right nor wrong, it's the law. Slave status passes through the mother. Partus sequitur ventrem. It means –

Agostina I know what it means. It means a man can sell his own children. To see what profit it will bring, no doubt.

Pause.

Young What did you say your name was?

Agostina My mother named me Agostina. My surname is Brunias, though I have little use for it.

Young Brunias. My father's portrait painter. The dirty dog. I have several of his paintings myself. A lot of native females, as I recall. Must have spent his whole time hiding behind bushes spying on black women. Well, that is very entertaining. But as I said, I have work to do.

Agostina Please hear what I have to say, Sir William.

Young I have heard enough. Bunc will see you out.

Agostina Ascolta la mia storia, Signor Young! Per favore.

Beat.

Young All right. You may have a few minutes. But I warn you I am not used to being talked to like this by a woman. Least of all a coloured one.

Agostina Thank you, Sir William.

Young Be seated.

She sits. A pause.

Young Well, out with it.

Agostina I need your help.

He waits.

Agostina My mother was a household slave on this estate. When the Governor - your father - found out she'd had a child by his painter, he sold her away. But my father persuaded him to let me go free. I came and went as I pleased, but it was never made official. Father used to take trips to England, but he always came back. Then about a year ago he left for good. I think he must be ill. The overseer turned me straight out into the field. I can't pick coffee for the rest of my life, Sir William.

Young What does this have to do with me?

Agostina I have money saved. I would like to buy my manumission.

Beat.

Young You would like to purchase your freedom.

Agostina I am offering eighty-four pounds, which is a good price, plus the expense of registration at the office in Roseau, and the usual –

Young It is not for you to set the price though, is it?

Agostina *(beat)* What would you see as a fair price, Mr Young?

Young I am surprised you think you can walk in here and dictate terms to me. I can see you are reasonably intelligent. And Brunias has been unwise enough to educate you.

Agostina Unwise?

Young It has not made you happy, has it? It has not helped you to pick coffee.

Agostina You believe I should be content to pick coffee?

Young I believe we will all be content if we strive to fulfil our life's allotment.

Agostina And I do not deserve a different kind of life?

Beat.

Young What if I told you that wherever I go, I am given a rapturous welcome by my negroes? They catch my knees, they embrace me, they drag me from my horse? What if I tell you that I see happy industry wherever I travel? The abolitionists would have us believe all is misery, and flogging, and chains. Yet have I seen stripes on the backs of the slaves in the fields? Very few, if any. These people understand what life can offer them. Their needs are modest, their understanding of money limited. They are content to be ruled, if their basic wants are met. That is why I advocate good management. Proper food. Dancing at Christmas. Mr Wilberforce with all his moralising and promises has only succeeded in putting ideas into their heads. If he achieves anything, it will be an uprising, like that in Saint Domingo.

Agostina If they are so happy, why would they rise up?

Young Because ideas have been inserted into their minds!

Beat.

Agostina And myself?

Young You are an unfortunate by-product of the frailty of men.

Agostina Sir William. I am not here to debate with you. I could try to tear away the veil that covers your eyes. I could tell you that on these islands, punishment with the whip is not applied to the back, but to the buttocks, so it is not visible. I could show you the gangs of field slaves sold away for one look amiss, the mothers whose babies have been ripped from their breasts, the stinking holds of Guinea ships full of kidnapped children. I could take you to see the heads stuck on poles on the road to Grand Bay. There are a thousand arguments, but I will not produce them, because your eyes will only see what they choose to see. Everyone knows the meaning of freedom, Sir William. It is not an idea that has to be taught. Even you know it's not right to take it away from your fellow man. So to make it feel better you invent divisions and grades of men. The savage. The Negro. The white man.

Young Oh believe me, they are not invented. What clearer illustration do you need than what is taking place at this moment? I am over here, and you are over there. And who is asking something of whom?

Agostina I don't deny that you hold all the cards in your hand. I am only asking you to show some compassion.

Young You are demanding that I give up the value of your labour and that of your offspring, far into the future, for a matter of a few pounds, not to mention the administrative headache. If you imagine that I expend my precious time and offices in the service of every half-breed female who crosses my threshold, you are mistaken. Even one that has learned parrot fashion the language of her masters in order to attack me in my own house!

Agostina Sir William, you are my only hope. I am sorry, I did not mean –

Young It is a little late for apologies. Now get out.

Agostina Please. I can't go back to that life. Have pity.

Her voice catches.

Young Be grateful to God for what you have. And you needn't turn on the tears. Feminine ways do not work with me. Bunc, where are you?

Agostina I am begging you, Sir William. I will do anything.

Young You are a slave and you will remain a slave. Let's hope it will teach you.

She falls to the floor.

Young Get up, for pity's sake, I'll have no mawkish displays. Bunc, I say!

She crawls to him and grabs his leg.

Young Don't touch me. Take your hands off me at once.

She works her way up his body till her face meets his. They stare, inches apart.

Young You think you can rouse me, do you? Think I will want you, you black bitch?

She spits in his face. Then strides from the room, colliding with BUNC, coming in. She pushes past him and exits, leaving him staring at YOUNG, wiping spit from his face.

Young What are you gawking at, you stupid boy? Get out of my sight.

Scene 7

The CHORUS.

- How to trace a line through silence?
- How to climb the branches of a tree that has no roots?
- Pick a blood-filled name among the plucked and pruned and ready-made
- A passing virtue, a French fancy, a pet, a planet, a month, a memory
- Patience, Patty, Polidore, Nanny, Fanny, Venus, Carlisle, Christmas
- Can a soul outlive the ship and the plantation?
- Can a name endure the years of speechlessness
- To emerge intact into the light?

DANIEL *enters* ROBYN'S *office*.

- Daniel** Mum's been arrested.
- Robyn** Oh shit.
- Daniel** They've taken her to this place – what's it called – a centre.
- Robyn** A detention centre or a removal centre?
- Daniel** The second one I think. It's near Heathrow airport.
- Robyn** That means they're getting ready to put her on a flight.
- Daniel** Jesus! I didn't even have time to – this is a nightmare.
- Robyn** All right. Let me think. We need to switch tactics.
- Daniel** What about the appeal?
- Robyn** It's too late for that. This puts a completely different light on things. Have you spoken to her? How is she?

Daniel I can't get through. Her phone's not working.

Robyn What about visiting? They have to give her access to a lawyer. Whether it's by phone, or... Daniel, are you listening?

He is looking at the picture.

Daniel Sorry, yes.

Robyn You need to arrange a visit. As soon as possible. Meanwhile I'll look for other solutions. We have to stay focused, and optimistic.

Daniel She could be on a plane right now.

Robyn No, it takes time to organise. We must hold our nerve. Go and see her, and let me work on this. OK?

Daniel OK.

He turns back to the picture.

Robyn Daniel. Time is of the essence.

Beat.

Daniel Relative of yours?

Robyn Yes. *(beat)* Not in the picture.

Daniel Of course not.

Robyn Sorry, what I mean is –

Daniel You mean you inherited it.

Robyn Yes, I did actually. Daniel, we need to move on this now.

Daniel Feels a bit out of place.

Robyn Sorry?

Daniel The picture. A bit outdated.

Robyn Sentimental value, you know.

Daniel Do you like it?

Robyn Daniel. We need to help your mother.

Daniel What do you like about it?

Robyn *(beat)* I find it beautiful.

Daniel Do you think some people would find it offensive?

Robyn I don't think you can judge it like that. You have to put it in context.

Daniel That's easy for you to say.

Robyn *(beat)* You could be right. But I prefer to focus on what's important. Janice, for instance.

He jabs towards the painting. They speak at the same time.

Daniel That's just my point!

Robyn Don't touch it! Please.

Pause.

Robyn I'm sorry if the picture offends you. It's the only thing I have left of my family. I'm not proud of it but I can't go through life feeling ashamed. I do this job to try to give something back. I try my best to work against the system. I speak for people, on a daily basis, who have no voice of their own.

Daniel Yeah? Or is your voice just louder? Good thing for you there's people out there with no voice. You seem to be doing pretty well out of them.

Robyn *(stunned)* That is outrageous. You know nothing about me.

Daniel Oh, come on. Look around you.

Robyn What's that supposed to mean? You came here for my help. Why are you being so rude?

Beat.

Daniel He was my ancestor. The painter.

Robyn Brunias? Your ancestor?

Daniel Don't sound so surprised. What do you think happened after he painted them washing in the river? *(beat)* He lived in Dominica. Had a family there. Had kids with the slaves too – all the white men did. Call it exploitation, call it rape – call it love, if you want to. One of those kids was my ancestor, six generations ago. Quite a woman, by all accounts. You have to wonder whether any of them is her mother.

Beat

Daniel See, Brunias went out there with the first British governor, Sir William Young. I've been looking into him. Makes for interesting bedtime reading.

Robyn I know. Sir William Young was my seven-times great grandfather.

Scene 8

The CHORUS.

— There's many a slave who refuses to be owned

— Who takes freedom by the hand and runs into the mountains, to join the
Maroons

— They claim back their African lives, out of reach of soldiers and cannon, in the
heights of Layou and Mabouya

— Colihaut and Le Grand Soufriere. From high up in the hills they look down on the
way they have come. The place of arrival, the place of sale, the place of
punishment and the place of death

— Agostina answers the call of the conch, as it echoes from camp to camp

— Its message spreading across the skin like fear. She runs, scaling the Morne Neg
Mawon, to join the great chief Balla in his hide-out

— From here they wage war on the estates - striking, raiding, burning. No-one sleeps

— The new Governor is up in arms

— This is an internal enemy of the most alarming kind

— He swears to hunt them down, starting with the chiefs

— Jupiter, Zombie, Goree Greg, Cicero

— And Balla, Agostina's man by now

— The father of her two children

— But when the soldiers come upon the camp, they find the men gone on a raid

— So they pluck instead their precious jewels, dragging them down the mountain

— To decorate the streets of Roseau

AGOSTINA, *in chains. She is in jail.*

YOUNG *is admitted, followed by* BUNC.

Agostina Who is that? What do you want?

Young She doesn't know us, Bunc. Has it really been that long?

Agostina Sir William Young. What are you doing here? Is it my children? Can you tell me where they are?

Young Your offspring are being cared for.

Agostina Thank God.

Young A pity your menfolk didn't show the same concern when they ran away, leaving the women and children behind.

Agostina What do you want? Please deliver your message and go.

Young Talks like the Queen of England, doesn't she Bunc.

BUNC *titters*.

Young Have you forgotten who owns you? You won't look so proud when you're burning in the market place in Roseau. Come to think of it, with the women, they hang them first, then burn them.

Pause.

Young What I don't understand is why you ran off in the first place. You were well looked after. Is it really better to live like a wild animal, chanting African spells?

Agostina *(beat)* I thought you returned to England years ago, Sir William.

Young I am back momentarily, to attend to matters on the estate.

Agostina What matters?

Young That is not your affair, girl. You are due in court tomorrow. Along with the other women. Were you all his wives? The ways of the uncivilised are quite perverted, are they not, Bunc?

Bunc Yes, Massa.

Agostina Balla is the bravest man I have ever met.

Young Was it brave to burn the Rosalie estate to the ground? To butcher the overseer and drink his blood?

AGOSTINA *laughs*.

Young You find the death and mutilation of others amusing.

Agostina Your imagination runs wild, Sir William. The most Balla and his men drank that night was Rosalie's store of rum. *(beat)* So your debts have caught up with you, Sir William. Did you spend too much on gambling and whores?

BUNC *smiles*.

Young You laugh at me, you muttonhead?

He cuffs BUNC.

Agostina Leave him alone! He's done nothing wrong. Time was you'd never have laid your hand on a slave.

Young Time was I was new to this corrupted place. It makes brutes of us all.

Agostina Some of us were born brutes.

Young I've a good mind to walk away. I came to offer you a lifeline. I've persuaded the judge to show clemency. If you give information - the location of other camps, names and numbers of men, that sort of thing, you'll be treated with leniency. If you're lucky, you'll be returned to my keeping, and allowed to live.

Agostina Everyone knows blacks can't be witnesses in court. They'd have to take their word against whites.

Young They have passed temporary legislation. Another idea of mine. Clever, isn't it?

Agostina What are they offering?

Young Breath-taking. You almost have to admire it, Bunc.

Agostina I won't give them a thing, tell them that. Not a word. They'll have to kill me first. Do you think I value my life enough to betray a single Maroon? They can eat shit.

Young Now she shows her colours. A savage at heart, like the rest of them. I shall be on my way then. You hold your life cheap, I can see that. But for a moment there I thought you cared about the lives of your children. I must have been mistaken.

A beat.

Agostina No!

Young The choice is yours. Come along, Bunc. I say, let me out!

Scene 9

The CHORUS.

- Going Home. Some dos and don'ts
- Brought to you by the British High Commission
- The more you plan for your return, the easier life will be when you arrive. Who will meet you at the airport? Where will you stay?
- If you have friends or family living on the island, take their details so that you can contact them when you arrive
- You may face a number of challenges adjusting to your new environment. Most people settle fairly well but some may experience mental health problems
- Establish good relationships, develop a healthy lifestyle, eat well, manage your stress, get adequate sleep and exercise
- Travel where possible in the day. Keep your cash hidden from view. Don't walk around after dark in unfamiliar places
- Don't discuss your personal situation. Don't tell strangers your destination. Don't accept lifts or be-friend people you don't know
- Make sure you use dialect – overseas accents can attract unwanted attention. Wherever possible, try to be 'local'

ROBYN *and* DANIEL.

- Robyn** It's not good news, I'm afraid. There's a flight going to the Caribbean on 21st May, with five deportees on board. I've managed to get hold of a list of names.
- Daniel** Is Janice on it?
- Robyn** I'm afraid so, Daniel.
- Daniel** Oh no. That's in two weeks. Jesus Christ.
- Robyn** I know. I'm sorry.

Daniel What can we do? What else have you got?

Robyn It would help if I could talk to her.

Daniel It's the mobile signal. After the last visit, I didn't hear from her for three days.

Robyn I am starting to run out of ideas, Daniel.

Daniel What are you saying? It's not the end of the line. It can't be.

Robyn I don't know where else to go with this.

Daniel That's just not good enough. I can't accept that.

Robyn Like I said, I'm very sorry.

Daniel This is my mother we're talking about.

She stays silent.

Daniel It's all right for you. This kind of thing would never happen to you.

Robyn That's not fair, Daniel. It's not that straightforward.

Daniel Have you any idea what your ancestors did? Have you even bothered to find out?

Robyn I haven't looked into it much. I didn't want to know, to be honest.

Daniel Out of sight, out of mind. But I'll take the pretty picture. Seeing it's worth a few bob.

Robyn It was a long time ago, Daniel.

Daniel Don't you ever feel guilty?

Robyn Guilty? What good would that do?

Daniel Do you feel anything at all?

Robyn It makes me uncomfortable, of course. But I prefer to turn it into something positive. I can be different from them. Better. *(beat)* Slavery's over, Daniel. People like my ancestors have been consigned to the dumping ground of history. Idiots and racists. The good guys won.

Daniel Ah yes. Abolition. That great British act of kindness. You commit a crime for centuries, stop doing it because it's wrong, then go on about your achievement for the next two hundred years.

Robyn You can't discount the good because of the bad.

Beat.

Daniel Let me get this straight, Robyn. Are you saying you haven't benefitted at all?

Robyn My mum was different. She walked away. Had me when she was still a teenager. I had a pretty rocky childhood.

Daniel I'm sorry about that. But background still makes a difference, doesn't it? Ways of thinking, ways of speaking. Doors that open or close.

Robyn *(beat)* What do you want from me, Daniel?

Pause.

Daniel I want you to help my mother. Pull out all the stops. Please.

Robyn I've tried. I've been through it a hundred times. I just don't know what more I can do. I'm sorry.

Daniel So am I, Robyn. So am I.

Scene 10

The CHORUS sings:

God Almighty see this very wicked world,
Him say, sister, come away!
What for you no come to me?
Sister say, Oh God Almighty,
Too much glad to come away!
When one die, him sickness over,
Him leave all trouble in this sinful world
Him want no food, no clothes, no sleep
Him much too glad to come away.

AGOSTINA sits, eyes closed, tired after a day in the coffee field.

YOUNG, some way off, with BUNC.

Young Go and fetch Agostina for me, will you.

BUNC approaches AGOSTINA and gently shakes her shoulder.

Bunc Miss Aggie. It's Bunc.

Agostina Oh, it's you. Come, sit with me. How are things with you, Bunc?

BUNC sits beside her.

Bunc Not so bad, you know. Me cyan stay long. The Massa's waiting. He want a word with you, Miss Aggie.

Agostina Let him wait.

Bunc He sail for Englan tomorrow.

Agostina Good.

Beat.

Bunc You heard what happen?

Agostina I heard about Cicero. They left his body stretched over a cartwheel in the Square.

Bunc On market day it was. We all see him. And smell him. You know they gave Petit Jaques thirty pound to speak against him. Thirty pound!

Agostina Thirty pieces of silver. They know what they're doing. (*beat*) I know about Balla too.

Bunc You had no choice, Miss Aggie. Was for you piccanies. Everybody know that. No-one blame you for it.

She doesn't answer.

Bunc He fight like a Trojan, Miss Aggie. He refuse to let them take him alive. He fight and rave 'til them have to shoot him in the leg to take him along. And still he rave.

She nods.

YOUNG *paces, impatient.*

Bunc Still he rave and shout, where's my son? So they bring him his son – your son – and still he won't answer no questions.

BUNC *jumps up and acts the part of Balla.*

Bunc He say, Cut me head from me body, me not afraid to die! Strike off me head, do it! Me care only for me son, he say. And me obi. That's all me care about. Then he show them the obi hanging round him neck. He say, bury this for I, bury this, and me will not die. Look at these men, son, he say – your son was there watching all along – he say look, son and remember what happen here.

YOUNG's *patience has run out. He sets off towards them.*

Bunc The white men – the Beckeys - kill your father. Remember that, it was the Beckeys who –

Young It was the Beckeys who what, Bunc?

Bunc Nothing, Massa. Sorry, Massa.

Young What kept you?

Agostina It's my fault. I asked him to sit with me a minute.

Young (*Beat*) Well don't just stand there, boy, fetch me some refreshment.

BUNC *goes.*

Young No word of thanks for getting you out of jail? And there was I thinking living on my estate would be preferable to public execution.

Agostina I understood the estate is to be sold.

Young Indeed, and you along with it. Unless of course...

Agostina Unless what?

Young (beat) I suppose you have heard about the fate of your savage? News travels fast in these parts.

Agostina A man left hanging in an iron cage on the road into town is not called news. It is called murder.

Young It took him a week to die, they say.

Beat.

Agostina What do you want with me, Sir William? Surely you have better things to do on the night before your departure than crow over Balla's death?

Young I am not here to gloat. Whatever you think of me, I wish to help you. I bring you word of your children.

BUNC arrives with a glass. YOUNG drinks it. He gives the empty glass back to BUNC, who stands and waits.

Young Go on then. Don't go far.

BUNC exits.

Young The girl, what is it you call her?

Agostina Marie-Rose.

Young The girl will be returned to the estate. The boy, I have plans for.

Agostina Plans?

Young He shows potential. His looks are good, and he seems bright. I would like to take him back with me to England. Put him to school. There are precedents – though he's no African prince. I came for your blessing.

A pause.

Agostina Will you free him?

Young Only if it's in his interests and mine. Fortunes can change in England. And there's the navy, if all else fails. It will be a great chance for him. Don't worry, I will keep him

away from the society ladies. They like nothing better than a new black trinket.
(*beat*) Do I have your blessing?

Agostina Does it matter? You will take him anyway. He is your property, after all.

Pause.

Agostina You and your kind will never occupy every part of him. Remember, he witnessed the fate of his father. That's not something you forget.

Young I'm afraid in England he will come to view the superstitions of savages with derision. I have no doubt that he'll remember his father's ravings over that - charm - around his neck, with nothing but embarrassment. Bury this and I will not die? Ridiculous.

Agostina If it is so ridiculous, why are you all so afraid of it? Why make laws against it?

Beat.

Young Tell me sincerely, do you believe in such things?

Agostina I see. Even you have a grain of doubt. Didn't you know, Sir William? You don't have to believe in it for it to work.

Young (*beat*) You disappoint me. I thought you more enlightened. (*beat*) It's not the first time I've encountered such obtuseness. What was it now? (*remembering*) Providence must be propitiated. One finds such nonsense in romantics the world over, it seems.

Agostina Do you know what happened to it?

Young What?

Agostina Balla's obi. Did they discard it?

Young I picked it up myself. I was curious, I admit. Wanted to see what all the fuss was about. It was nothing but a rough old thing. (*beat*) I will take my leave then. I am sorry that things have not gone your way.

Agostina From what I hear, things are not going your way. Rumour has it that people in England are getting tired of slavery. It makes them look bad.

Young Do not mistake every rumour you hear for fact.

Agostina Not at all. But as you said yourself, news travels fast in these parts.

Beat.

Agostina Men like you will never learn. There are things in this life you can't buy. And there are people that you will never own.

Young I take no joy from ownership. Why do you constantly underestimate me?

Beat.

Young You once asked me to buy your freedom.

Agostina I have no money any more, Sir William.

Young Money means very little to me.

Agostina So what is it you want? Not *that*, or you'd have taken it already. Or perhaps you want me to offer it to you? No, it is something else. You want gratefulness. You want me to – what was it? - catch your knees, embrace you, drag you from your horse. I don't fit with your view of the world, do I, Sir William?

Young You think you're different from the others. Give it a few years and you'll be grovelling in the dirt with the rest. Bunc! We're leaving!

Agostina Take care of my boy. Please!

Young He will want for nothing. As for you, be warned - your next master may not be so kind. I hope for your sake he is as enlightened as I am. Bunc!

He goes. BUNC emerges and runs after YOUNG, leaving her there alone.

Scene II

The CHORUS.

— Freedom comes to Dominica like a curse at a Christening

— Her people step into their new lives with a hurricane at their backs and nothing in their pockets

- While their former masters collect compensation for their lost property
- Fifty years since abolition was first raised in Parliament, turns out the only way is to throw money at it
- There are millions to be made. From the rich baron to the pecksniffian Christian, no Briton turns the money down
- The reluctant investor in West Indian sugar steps out of the shadows
- The Scottish widow eking out a living from her one slave cashes in her inheritance
- The country Rector heaves a sigh of relief as he posts his claim
- And the Mother Country tucks the profits into her bodice, kicks up her skirts and skips into a new era
- By the time those skirts have been straightened and starched by the Victorians, Agostina's son has long since disappeared
- People don't always leave a mark, even in a world of paper
- Many have sunk without trace in the wake of empire
- A shipwreck still sending out ripples
- Still breaking on numberless shores

ROBYN *and* DANIEL.

Robyn I've found it, Daniel. I've found the legal loophole. It's not even a loophole, it's her constitutional fucking rights! So, I've been combing the Home Office policy on removals, which states that everyone must have access to legal advice while in detention. You with me?

Daniel So far.

Robyn The breakdown of the phone signal at the removal centre. It's been going on for weeks, right? So Janice hasn't been able to.

Daniel Talk to her lawyer.

Robyn Exactly.

Daniel Does that mean - ?

Robyn And the government's known about the problem since January, and done nothing. They gave out a few sim cards for a different network, but not to anyone on the 21st May deportation flight. Do you see?

Daniel But is it, will it work?

Robyn I know it sounds like a small detail. But access to legal advice is a fundamental part of our democracy.

Daniel I see. So for mum, this could be - ?

Robyn This could be it. I don't see how they can wriggle out of it.

Daniel Will it be enough?

Robyn We'll take it straight to court. I can't be completely sure – but any judge – it's the Home Office's own policy for Christ's sake!

Beat.

Daniel Won't they just fix the issue and put her on the next flight?

Robyn It gives us time. For a high court appeal. To mobilise, get the media involved. The important thing is she doesn't get on that plane.

Daniel I see. That's great, Robyn. I'm impressed.

Robyn It was staring me in the face. I should have seen it before.

Pause. They speak at the same time.

Daniel That makes me feel -

Robyn How are you doing?

Robyn Sorry. Go ahead.

Daniel No, you go.

Robyn *(beat)* I forgot to say. They can't keep her there. If this works, they'll have to send Janice home.

Daniel Amazing. Does she know? Have you told her?

Robyn Of course I haven't. I can't bloody well get through, can I?

They laugh.

Robyn How's she been?

He shakes his head.

Daniel You should see what it's like in there. It's basically a prison.

Robyn I know. I've been in those places.

Daniel You know what the worst thing is? She's so loyal. However racist and ignorant, however badly she's treated, she believes in this country. It's tragic.

Robyn But this is something new. They've really excelled themselves this time.

Daniel It's just more of the same shit, Robyn.

Robyn We have to keep believing that the system will come through for us.

Daniel I guess that depends who the system's been set up to serve.

Pause. He looks at the picture.

Robyn Shall I take it down? Put it in the attic? Would you rather it was kept out of sight?

Daniel I'd rather you took some responsibility for it, that's all.

Robyn You can't hold me accountable for the past, Daniel. None of that was done in my name. I can apologise if you want me to, but what difference would it make? It wouldn't be sincere.

Daniel Did I ask you to apologise?

Robyn Even if I said sorry, would I still owe you? Could I go right back to doing what I was doing before?

Daniel Good point.

Robyn And what would you do with my apology? How would it help you? Forgiveness has to be a choice. You'd have to have the option not to forgive.

Daniel That's a good way of putting it.

Robyn It can't be just sorry, that's OK, job done, everyone comes up smiling. It doesn't work like that.

Daniel It's not as simple as that.

Robyn Exactly. We agree on something at last.

Daniel There has to be a concrete outcome.

Beat.

Daniel You've heard of reparations, I guess, being a lawyer.

Robyn Governments giving money in reparations for slavery, colonialism...

Daniel Governments, companies, individuals.

Robyn It's an interesting debate.

Daniel It's not always money. It can be cultural exchange, technological support, resources. Support in kind.

Robyn Look, Daniel, I think I know what you're getting at. I'll save you the trouble. If you're worried about my bill, I'm ahead of you there. It's the least I can do.

Daniel I'm not worried about your bill, Robyn.

Robyn Oh. Right. Sorry. Well, the offer's there, if you want it. If you think it's appropriate.

Daniel I'm happy to pay your bill. But if you're offering to waive it, I accept. Thank you.

Robyn Good. Obviously, we'll have to wait on the outcome of the challenge, but... yeah. Fingers crossed.

Daniel Thank you, Robyn. *(pause)* So, to carry on with what I was saying about reparations. I would like the picture.

Robyn Sorry?

Daniel The Brunias painting.

Robyn What do you - ? Are you suggesting I send it back to Dominica? Like a repatriation?

Daniel No, I mean give it to me. And my mother.

Robyn It's mine. Why should I give it to you?

Daniel Because it was painted by my ancestor. Because it would be a meaningful way of paying reparations to my family from your family.

Robyn What do you want it for? You don't even like it. It's, it's an heirloom. It's all I have of my family.

Daniel That's weird. You told me you felt bad about your ancestors. You said you'd consigned them to the rubbish bin of history.

Robyn But it's a picture. It's a piece of art. That's different.

Daniel Isn't it a symbol of everything they stood for?

Robyn Maybe – but in that case it represents the past. All the nasty things we've put behind us. That's how I look at it.

Daniel That's not how you look at it. You said you found it beautiful. You didn't say – here's a classic example of the colonial whitewashing of the evils of slavery.

Beat.

Robyn Have you any idea how much it's worth?

Daniel In money? Between ten and twenty thousand pounds.

Robyn What would you do with it? Sell it?

Daniel Why would I sell it? It was painted by my relative.

Robyn You said it yourself – it represents everything you hate.

Daniel It's different for us. We can reclaim it.

Robyn (*beat*) This is not how reparations work, Daniel.

Daniel How do reparations work?

Robyn This is too much. You've gone too far. I've offered to waive my bill. But it's like you'll never be satisfied. You think you're holding me to account, but you're just out for blood.

Daniel Are you going to give me the picture or not, Robyn?

Robyn No, I am not going to give you the fucking picture! It's mine, do you understand that? It belongs to me.

Daniel Perhaps you'd like some time to think about it. You'll see it makes sense. It would be a positive outcome. I know you're a fan of the positive outcome.

Robyn Don't patronise me.

Beat.

Robyn You know Daniel, in all the time I've known you, I've been waiting for you to tell me what your problem is. Why you feel like the whole world owes you. But you've never bothered, have you?

Daniel Never bothered? Why do you think that is? 'Cause I thought you might be one of the only white people I didn't have to explain everything to. Seems I was wrong about that.

Beat.

Daniel So it's all just talk. Window dressing. Long as the status quo doesn't have to change. Long as it doesn't cost you anything. When you start to really feel it, that's different. That's just the niggers getting greedy.

Robyn

(gasps) What did you say? Get out of my office. Do you hear me? Fuck off. I never want to see you again!

Scene 12

The CHORUS sings:

London is the place for me
London this lovely city
You can go to France or America,
India, Asia or Australia
But you must come back to London city
Well believe me I am speaking broadmindedly
I am glad to know my Mother Country
I have been travelling to countries years ago
But this is the place I wanted to know
London that is the place for me.

— Welcome Home, sons and daughters of Empire! 500 pairs of willing hands

— The Windrush slides upstream between the closing shores of Kent and Essex

— Standing by the ship's rail, the passengers get their first glimpse of the grey-greens
of England

— Their new home. Engineers, mechanics, carpenters, singers

— The tailor, ready to cut his coat according to his cloth. The welder, hoping to light
a spark, the poet to find a hearing

— The dance-band dream of Liverpool; the boxer cannot know what battles lie
ahead

— Questions are asked in Parliament

— Is it a good idea to let these people in?

— By the time the forties give way to the fifties, many are recruited straight into
factories

— They look after the sick, stamp the post and punch the tickets

- Questions are asked in the newspapers
- Is it time to shut the door?
- While from Dominica, the four times great granddaughter of Agostina Brunias steps off the boat with a small baby in her arms
- Treading the forward and backward paths of those who came before her
- Armed with a suitcase full of hope, a turbulent history and a warm cardigan
- An old country for a new life
- Into the cold embrace of the Mother Country.

JANICE and DANIEL. *They hold champagne glasses. The paperwork is still strewn on the floor.*

Janice Look at that. When they came for me, they didn't even give me time to clear up.

Daniel Leave it, mum. Have another glass.

He picks up the bottle and pours.

Janice Don't know what you're getting so carried away for. We're not out of the woods yet.

Daniel Something's gonna change, I can feel it. The story's out now. Other people are coming forward. It's been in the news. It's on the radio.

Janice One minute they were knocking on the door, and the next –

She breaks off, teary. He hugs her.

Daniel Hey, mum. It's all right. You're home now. *(beat)* I can give you a hand with this lot.

He picks up a sheaf of papers.

Janice Leave it, darlin. I'll clear it away in the morning.

Daniel What's this? We regret to inform you that we can no longer... huh?

Janice Give me that.

She snatches it.

Daniel Let me see it.

Janice We won't be needing it.

She puts it away.

Daniel Mum, why are you still hiding things from me?

Janice You got a rulebook says I gotta tell you everything?

Daniel I thought things were going to be different. You promised to be more open with me.

Pause.

Janice I lost my job. Back in '85. Year before you were born. Had a little - disagreement with a doctor. So there you are. Now you know. What you smiling for?

Daniel A disagreement?

Janice It wasn't my fault, if that's what you're thinking. I hadn't done what I did, that girl or her baby would have died for sure. Maybe both. She was scared out of her mind, and he was a high and mighty sort.

Daniel The father?

Janice The doctor. The old-fashioned kind. What was I supposed to do?

Daniel What did you do?

Janice Went over his head. Called in the senior – rushed that poor girl straight into surgery. It was touch and go.

Daniel So why did they sack you? You were in the right.

Janice Huh! The things you ask.

Daniel It's got racism written all over it, mum.

Janice You don't say! Goodness me, I just needed my boy to tell me that. Your generation think you invented racism.

Beat.

Janice That girl. Wouldn't let go of me. Had to stay with her through the whole thing.

Daniel I hope she was grateful. Did she thank you?

Janice Just kept saying she'd rather have had a boy. You've got to laugh, Danny. *(beat)*
Funny, the things you remember. Even had a boy's name lined up. Robin. Like the
bird.

Daniel Robin? Are you sure about that?

Janice You saying my memory's faulty?

Daniel Course not, mum.

Janice What's up with you?

Daniel Nothing. Forget it. It's fine. *(beat)* But you got another job.

Janice I was cleared, when the facts came out. I was lucky.

Daniel *Lucky?*

Janice All's well that end's well. Gave me a bit of time at home with my baby boy, didn't it.

Beat.

Daniel What kind of baby was I?

Janice Let me see – you were damn ugly. But to me, you were the most beautiful thing in
the whole world.

He puts his arm around her. Beat.

Daniel I wish you'd talk to me more. You must have so many stories to tell.

Janice What can I say, son? I've never been one for stories.

Scene 13

AGOSTINA *sits, just as YOUNG left her.*

BUNC *comes back at a run, out of breath.*

Agostina Bunc, what are you doing? You should go in. He'll kill you if he sees you out here with me.

Bunc Me know that, Miss Aggie. Him can wait a minute.

He catches his breath. Then he pulls Balla's obi from his pocket.

Bunc This is for you.

Agostina It's Balla's obi! Where did you get it?

Bunc Me take it from the Massa's room when he not looking. Here. Take it.

He gives it to her.

Agostina Thank you, Bunc. You've done the right thing.

He turns to go.

Agostina Wait, Bunc. What about you?

Bunc Don't worry about I, Miss Aggie. Just bury the obi. Bury it for Balla.

He goes. AGOSTINA gets down and begins to dig a hole.

Conclusion

*The truth is there has never been, and never will be, in the grammar of slave holders, any present tense for the oppressions of slavery.*¹

The question proposed at the outset of this thesis was deceptively simple: is it possible to dramatize Atlantic slavery and abolition? Throughout the course of this study, the clarity of that initial enquiry has threatened to evaporate under a battery of multiplying, complicating considerations. In critical terms, what began with an interrogation of the feasibility of a Georgian theatre of abolition, burgeoned into what I hope will prove to be an expansive, if not exhaustive, exploration of the theatrical and performative voices of Mary Prince and Robert Wedderburn. What began with a tentative foray into an ancestry that I have hitherto tried my best to ignore, resulted in a proliferation of historical material that I now believe is too important not to share. As such, the trilogy of plays and the three critical chapters that comprise this thesis reflect a continuum of learning. And, despite its considerable peregrinations, I hope that the work presented here answers my original question with a resounding affirmative, albeit one that is hedged with qualifications and disclaimers.

I have approached the material along a number of different lines and from a variety of angles. The first two chapters and their accompanying plays were informed by a wish to highlight the contributions made to abolitionism by figures such as Mary Prince and Robert Wedderburn, who have to a large extent been excluded from mainstream narratives of the dismantling of slavery. Their subaltern voices did not chime with Georgian and Victorian ideas of national pride and unity, just as accurate portrayals of Black, enslaved and mixed-race subjectivities were absent from the Georgian stage. It took until the late twentieth century for such voices to begin to be ‘unearthed’ – which very term suggests their original roles were marginal and have now been rehabilitated thanks to changing political trends and the work of a small number of intellectuals. Unfortunately, even today Prince and Wedderburn remain on the margins of history: in David Olusoga’s 600-page, prodigiously-researched and elegantly-told history of Black Britons published in 2016, Prince is mentioned once in passing, and Wedderburn does not appear at all.² This resonates with the apparent survival of the hegemonic categories of literacy which Wedderburn fought so savagely against, and which evidently continue to exclude him.

My critical exploration into the performative voice of Mary Prince flies to a certain extent in the face of recent scholarship that warns against efforts to uncover an ‘authentic’ voice, canonising Prince’s text as part of racialised formulations of ‘Black’ writing. As Prince’s editor Sara Salih emphasises, ‘the

¹ From the *Anti Slavery Reporter*, Vol. 2, No. 40 (1928), 294. Quoted in Nicholas Draper, *The Price of Emancipation: Slave-ownership, Compensation and British Society at the End of Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 36.

² David Olusoga, *Black and British: A Forgotten History* (London: Pan, 2016). Some of it is still forgotten, clearly.

Black subject has always been shifting, unstable, and complex.³ Conversely, the critic K. Merinda Simmons reminds us that *The History of Mary Prince* offers much to ‘contemporary dialogues that investigate “hybrid” female subjectivities, both in the spheres of literary criticism, and feminist and postcolonial theories.’⁴ Simmons stresses that Prince ‘speaks both with rebellion to masters and with internalized acquiescence to the moralistic conventions of her British audience.’⁵ This interpolation of the duality of Prince’s voice admits the possibility that it is by no means singular or consistent. It is this multiplicity that I sought to exploit, in both the critical work and the play *Mother Country*, as the spur to an interrogation of the elements of resistance and duplicity in both Prince’s life and her text.

In my investigations into the highly eccentric preacher and all-round rabble rouser Robert Wedderburn and his eclectic social milieu, I wished to foreground the performative nature of his radical activism against the repressive atmosphere of the Georgian politicised public sphere. In an attempt to emphasise the inherent theatricality of Wedderburn’s political productions, oral dexterity and physical performance became especially important. Thus, I paid particular attention to the problematics of Wedderburn’s relationship with literacy, concluding that though it was impossible to determine whether the charismatic West Indian was ‘illiterate’ by choice or by circumstance, it may have been a combination of the two. Wedderburn’s fierce identification with his enslaved mother and grandmother’s world-views and tendency to syncretise seemingly disparate discourses was the springboard for an enquiry into Wedderburn’s cultural inspirations: could his syncretising modalities be characterised as a ‘creolizing’ of discourses? This discussion of the influence of Wedderburn’s Creole and West African epistemological and cultural influences led to a treatment of the carnivalesque in both the critical work and the play *Glorious Causes*.

Perceptions of the histories of slavery and abolition and their residues in the public imagination have been crucial to all the components of this thesis, given that a central aspect of critical race studies in the U.K. has often been premised on an interrogation of the persistence of these legacies. Paul Gilroy has long maintained that Britain’s ‘inability to come to terms with the disputed legacies of empire has been corrosive’, while Stuart Hall emphasises that slavery is ‘what lies at the root of and shapes predominantly relations between blacks and whites in the west.’⁶ The third strand of the work presented here focused more specifically on the presence of the legacies of slavery and abolition in British society today. The constitution of the British subject, as Chapter Three investigates, was to some degree influenced by the rhetoric of abolitionism and the slave trade debates of the period. As Srividhya Swaminathan has emphasised, the abolition of the slave trade in the early nineteenth century, although

³ Carey, Ellis and Salih, p. 125.

⁴ Simmons, 95.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁶ Gilroy writing in the catalogue to the 2015 Tate Britain exhibition *Artist and Empire*, a major exhibition of art from the 16th century to the present day. Hall speaking about Olaudah Equiano’s legacy in the 1996 BBC drama-documentary *A Son of Africa*. Quoted in Wallace, p. 135.

one issue among many in the period, ‘produced significant and dynamic arguments that defined the nature and character of the Briton.’⁷ To date, most mainstream cultural productions have continued to feed into the myth that ‘Britishness’ and slavery have always been incompatible, whereas when abolitionism was first proposed in parliament, Britain presided over the largest slaving empire in the world.⁸ Equally, the public perception of the nation’s role has remained largely focused on abolition, and William Wilberforce’s part in it.

Since the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in 2007, however, a number of televised history programmes and the work of projects such as the Legacies of British Slave-ownership, have helped shine a light on previously obscure aspects of emancipation, such as the compensation paid to slave-holders in 1834.⁹ Awareness is increasing of the multiple ways in which Britain continued to profit from slavery until 1888, when it was abolished in the Americas.¹⁰ Over a decade after the bicentenary, for a British public in the aftermath of the so-called Windrush Scandal, discursive connections between empire, race and the establishment of British identity are inevitably more familiar. The Black Lives Matter movement has gained traction in the United Kingdom in 2020, during a time when a global pandemic has highlighted structural inequalities endemic in systems of power. Catherine Hall has noted that due to ‘welcome changes in schools and universities, more scholarship produced, more materials made available’, there is a sense that ‘the story cannot any longer be told in quite the way it once was.’¹¹ Hall claims that anecdotal evidence from educational institutions, the media and public debates suggests that projects such as the Legacies of British Slave-ownership have made a difference. She contends that: ‘The national narrative has shifted: it is impossible now to think about abolition without compensation. Furthermore, the empirical work has given people who are making political claims the historical grounding from which to do so.’¹²

In the arena of television, the manner of representation of enslavement and the transatlantic slave trade, whilst still significantly limited, has nonetheless attempted to address the involvement and complicity of the British government, British people, British institutions and British businesses. Ross

⁷ Swaminathan, p. 210.

⁸ Brown, p. 3.

⁹ David Olusoga’s 2015 BBC documentary ‘Britain’s Forgotten Slave Owners’ has been repeated several times. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b063db18>. Catherine Hall, Nick Draper et al., *Legacies of British Slave-ownership: Colonial Slavery and the Formation of Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). See also Draper, *The Price of Emancipation*. The UCL project set up by Catherine Hall, amongst others, the Legacies of British Slave-ownership, can be found at <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/>.

¹⁰ In recent years, all sections of the British press have run articles on the 1834 compensation paid to slaveholders, albeit with differing emphases. Much of the commentary was prompted by an ill-advised tweet sent out by the treasury in 2018 announcing that ‘millions of you helped end the slave trade through your taxes.’ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/12/treasury-tweet-slavery-compensate-slave-owners>. See also Marika Sherwood, *After Abolition: Britain and the Slave Trade Since 1807* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris and Co., 2007).

¹¹ Hall, ‘Doing reparatory history’, 18.

¹² *Ibid.*, 17.

Wilson contends that issues of apology and reparations have also been addressed, seeking to make sure that the trade in enslaved Africans is considered part of British history. He writes that: ‘A significant feature of this revisionism is that the slave trade is shown to be ‘in’ Britain, whether in the grand public institutions, the profits made or the responsibilities that contemporary Britain owes.’¹³ Wilson readily admits, however, that the impact of more recent programmes is certainly not comparable with that of the 1970s television series *Roots*, which lingers in the public imagination, ‘indicating perhaps an ingrained perception of ‘distance’ in the popular memory of the slave trade in Britain.’¹⁴ He agrees with Diana Paton, who observes that some emergent post-colonial narratives, such as stories of slave resistance and Black abolitionism, can be integrated more easily than others into a wider narrative that emphasises liberal humanitarianism,¹⁵ conceding that a hesitancy to develop programme content that ‘deals with the traumatic history and legacy of the transatlantic slave trade’ is still evident in some quarters.¹⁶

Theatre is arguably the creative arena where the most advances have been made in terms of accurate and considered representations of enslaved, Black and mixed-race subjectivities. Although it could be claimed that small-scale productions have little reach and impact in terms of the popular imagination, some larger companies have also recently produced thoughtful engagements with slavery and abolition on British soil. The Royal Shakespeare Company’s production in February 2020 of Juliet Gilkes Romero’s play *The Whip* threw light on the political machinations behind the compensation package of 1834.¹⁷ Janice Okoh’s play *The Gift*, which features Sarah Bonetta, a young enslaved Yoruba princess, who was ‘given’ to Queen Victoria, switches mischievously between the nineteenth century and the present day, in a busy collision of time frames and doubling actors designed to expose how little attitudes around Black Britishness have changed over time.¹⁸ Until March 2020, this flowering of representations of slavery and the enslaved on stages around the U.K. looked set to proliferate, and it is hoped that the global pandemic which at the time of writing has shut the doors of every theatre in this country will not prevent their re-opening at a point in the near future.

To conclude, the appearance in British public life, since the bicentenary of 2007, of a small number of historical, social and cultural projects and products, as well as recent wide-spread activism, has

¹³ Wilson, 395-6.

¹⁴ Ibid., 396.

¹⁵ Paton, 285.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Juliet Gilkes Romero, *The Whip* (London: Oberon Books, 2020).

¹⁸ This play was co-produced by Eclipse Theatre and the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry. Janice Okoh, *The Gift* (London: Nick Herne Books, 2020). Other examples include Matilda Ibini’s *Muscovado* (Theatre 503, 2015), set on a sugar plantation in nineteenth-century Barbados; and Elizabeth Kuti’s *The Sugar Wife* (Soho Theatre, 2006). Although set in 1850s Ireland, this play juxtaposes the ethics and economics of slavery and poverty, inverting established paradigms of value and power, whilst questioning the transactional nature of altruism.

contributed to the beginnings of a shift in awareness of the legacies of Atlantic slavery, whereby the focus appears to be moving towards Britain's relationship with her colonies and the impacts of slave-holding on British soil, alongside the legacies enacted on all British metropolitan and formerly colonised people. This awareness has been reflected in the staging of Atlantic slavery and the representation of enslaved subjectivity in the theatre. The creative endeavour undertaken by the three plays in this thesis seeks to reflect, draw on and critique pre-existing creative productions, as well as engage with critical narratives and interpretations. I would like to entertain the possibility that the ideological, representational and artistic manifestations resulting from my work's continuity with, and variance from earlier forms and narratives, will prove to have been fertile ground for a fruitful dialogue between past histories and present realities. I believe that the importance of remembering and reimagining the past provides a utopian space of agency where, as American literature scholars Elisa Bordin and Anna Scacchi affirm, 'one has the possibility of an alternative – and hopefully healing – history, which includes slavery in a broader public national debate for the pedagogy of future generations.'¹⁹ Bordin and Scacchi stress that this project must be society-wide, and is not the business of people of colour alone; this enterprise 'requires a cross-racial understanding if it is to become part of a shared national past.'²⁰ I cherish the hope that this vital work of decolonisation will continue to gain ground, and that my own critical and creative efforts will represent a small contribution to that endeavour.

¹⁹ Bordin and Scacchi, p. 16.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

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