

## Resister and Rebel Storytellers: Slave Narratives and Neo-Slave Novels by and/or about Women Connected to Canada

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*I think slavery is the next thing to hell.*  
— Harriet Tubman

Historian Afua Cooper claims that “slavery is Canada’s best-kept secret” (*Angélique* 68–69).<sup>1</sup> After all, Canada prides itself on being “the promised land,” where refugee American slaves, including Josiah Henson,<sup>2</sup> whose memoirs inspired the classic anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, found freedom. Refugees from slavery came north by the thousands on the Underground Railroad, whose most famous “conductor,” Harriet Tubman, was poignantly called “Moses.” Yet, for over 200 years (1628 to 1833), slavery was both legal and widespread in colonial Canada; it involved thousands of both Natives and Blacks (*Angélique* 70).<sup>3</sup> While in time Canada did come to “offer a haven to American slaves. . . [the Underground Railroad] also fostered a myth that the North Star led not just out of slavery but into freedom, equality, and full participation in Canadian life” (Walker 6; qtd. in Noel 7). Slavery, its stubborn legacy of systemic racism, and ongoing human trafficking of women and children are realities hard to own up to in a country that typically sees itself, and is seen internationally, as polite, civil, and peaceable—“a fair country.”<sup>4</sup>

In recent years, however, academics and authors have been filling in some of the shameful silences and correcting some of the distortions of the historical and literary records, particularly as regards enslaved women. There has been increasing recognition, for one thing, that storytelling is a method of resisting injustice (Fulton 30), and, for another, that neglecting these stories is a kind of “violence” (Sharpe xi). Thus, for various reasons, texts by and about enslaved people, especially women, are increasingly being made available. For example, the 1831 oral slave narrative told to Susanna Strickland, *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave. Related by Herself*, is now available online in a digital version; Benjamin Drew’s 1856 anthology, *The Refugee, or The Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada. Related by Themselves*, was reprinted in 2000; historian Afua Cooper’s biography of an eighteenth-century slave woman, *The Hanging of Angélique*, appeared in 2006, and historical novels centred on slave women written by Dionne Brand, *At the Full and Change of the*

*Moon*, and by Lawrence Hill, *The Book of Negroes*, were published in 1999 and 2007 respectively. The latter remained on the bestseller list throughout 2011, which was designated by the General Assembly of the United Nations as the International Year for People of African Descent. With a recent MLA president predicting “the emergence of a new interdisciplinary field, one that conjoins the critical and interpretive practices of the humanities with the ethical activism of the international human rights political movement” (Stanton; qtd. in Franklin 284), the time seems ripe for reevaluation of literature by and about enslaved women.<sup>5</sup> The texts we study here offer compelling portraits of some “mothers of the nation” (real and imagined), and respond to, critique, engage with, and reconstruct narratives of nation, while paying attention to issues of gender and race, which are often neglected.<sup>6</sup>

It is increasingly being recognized that “secrets about sexual relations between white masters and the black women they owned . . . lay at the heart of the slave system” (Taves 216). These “secrets” were known and indeed even recorded in oral, as well as written, narratives. To Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s famous question, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” the answer would appear to be, with some qualifications, yes. For example, Moira Ferguson, a specialist on women writers and slavery, notes “a vigorous sense of self” (6) in Mary Prince’s narrative, told, though it is, to an amanuensis. All four texts examined below—*The Hanging of Angélique*, *The History of Mary Prince*, *The Book of Negroes*, and *At the Full and Change of the Moon*—focus on women (historical, fictitious, or a blend of both) who succeed in telling their stories. Their words as much as their deeds are represented as acts of resistance and rebellion.<sup>7</sup>

Postmodernist criticism explores how blurred the boundaries between biography and autobiography, and between ostensibly “factual” writing and fiction, have become—hence the rise of terms such as “creative non-fiction,” “faction,” and “non-fiction novel.” In an interview about *The Book of Negroes*, Lawrence Hill speaks of the historical research that he did for his novel, and how he found memoirs to be of particular use in grounding his fiction. “The memoirs written by Africans and Europeans in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were by far the richest and most fascinating. . . . I also read the diary of the young British naval lieutenant John Clarkson, who organized the exodus from Halifax to Sierra Leone” (“Projecting History Honestly” 315). Critics praise Dionne Brand’s *At the Full and Change of the Moon* because it, too, “masterfully blends fact and fiction” (Tillet 914).

Further, as Judith Butler argues in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, “the ‘I’ has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation—or set of relations—to a set of norms” (8). As such, life-writing is not separable from social critique and ethical deliberation. Jill Ker Conway, memoirist and editor of other women’s memoirs, likewise draws attention to the double vision of the autobiographer as a recorder of “both inner life and external events.”

The autobiographer writes a narrative where subject and object are intermingled—where knower and the known are part of the same consciousness. This makes for riveting reading when the narrator can move seamlessly between the self as object and speaker, providing text which conveys both inner life and external events. That is why we often use memoirs as windows on the worlds the writers inhabit. They are social documents as well as literary texts—one reason why historians quote them so frequently. (vii)

Historical fiction may rely on life-writing; life-writing may use fiction-writing techniques; and both implicate the “I” in relationships. Narrating the story of one’s own life inevitably involves the selection and omission of events, the creation of characters, and the projection of a persona. Toni Morrison, author of *Beloved* (1987) and *A Mercy* (2008), which are novels about women slaves, makes a claim for the value of fictional representations that is not too dissimilar to Jill Ker Conway’s claim for memoirs, arguing that, “just because the slave’s world has to be imagined does not make it any less true” (“The Site of Memory” 112-13; qtd. in Sharpe xi). Philosopher and culture critic Martha Nussbaum argues passionately that there is a role for the literary imagination in public life: “novel-reading will not give us the whole story about social justice, but it can be a bridge both to a vision of justice and to the social enactment of that vision” (12). Thus this paper studies both life-writing (autobiography based on oral testimony and biography based on trial transcripts) and historical fiction for the insights of enslaved women about truth, identity, representation, and power.

It has long been acknowledged that “slavery is terrible for men; but it is more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own” (Jacobs 64). Such gendered “mortifications” are at least as old as the Biblical story of the Egyptian maidservant Hagar, forced to bear a child for her master Abraham, with the complicity of his barren wife Sarah (Genesis 16:3). In the past two decades, social scientists in Canada and elsewhere have developed compelling new analyses of the “intersectionality” of gender, race, class, and sexuality; have brought to wide public attention the many forms of violence against women, a subject wholly absent from the 1970 *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada*; and have reinterpreted sexual assault as a crime motivated by a desire to exert power rather than by sexual lust. Workplaces have developed and implemented policies to prevent sexual harassment and racism. In the same period, lawmakers have identified as crimes marital rape (Martin et al; Tang), rape in war (Simons), and human trafficking (Perrin). Thus there is a compelling sense in which both historical slave narratives and contemporary fictional neo-slave narratives, especially those that focus on women’s sexual exploitation and resistance, constitute “literature for our times.”<sup>8</sup>

Feminist historians and critics such as Afua Cooper, Helen Cooper, Maureen Elgersman, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, and Margaret Washington argue that “slavery was as much a system of sexual bondage as it was one

of racial bondage” (Cooper, *Angélique* 168). The brutal realities of slave women’s sexual exploitation, however, have frequently been regarded as “not for the public ear by their very nature,” as the nineteenth-century American abolitionist Olive Gilbert wrote in excising certain information from the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* in 1850 (qtd. in Washington 57). It is not surprising, then, that a generation earlier, according to Sue Thomas in her article on the legal suits surrounding *The History of Mary Prince*, Thomas Pringle “omitted from a reproduced letter of [Prince’s last master, John] Wood, to Mr. Taylor, Secretary to the Governor of the Leeward Islands Sir Patrick Ross, [Wood’s] allegation of Prince’s sexual ‘depravity’ as a more general sign of ‘her baseness’ . . . Pringle replaced the allegation with three asterisks, because, he explained in a footnote, ‘it is too indecent to appear in a publication to be perused by females’” (115). But “indelicate” or not, explicit sexual material is included in later anti-slavery autobiographies, such as Harriet Jacob’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Louisa Picquet’s *The Octoroon, or, Insider Views of Southern Domestic Life* (1861), and several of the brief refugee slave narratives by women collected by Benjamin Drew in *A North-side View of Slavery* (1856).

In Drew’s anthology (which was also published with the title *The Refugee: or The Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada. Related by Themselves*), Mrs. Henry Gowens boldly states, “My father was my master, Mr. —, who died in 1843” (146). White paternity of slave children was not uncommon, though its acknowledgement was usually forbidden. As DoVeanna Fulton points out, citing Harriet Jacobs’ evidence, “slave owners who fathered children by their slave women often prohibited mothers from revealing the identity of the child’s father” (134, n. 9).<sup>9</sup> Mrs. Gowens continues, “I have known many owners to have two or three colored women for wives, and when they got a white wife, keep all. If the slave woman would not comply she would be whipped, or else sold to the lowest, meanest fellow he could find” (146). Another refugee slave woman, Mrs. Ellis, who spent thirty-two years in slavery in Delaware before escaping to Canada with two of her children, was forced to do “heavy out-door work, —such as driving team, hauling manure, etc.,” and she reports “I have been whipped with a wagon whip and with hickories, —have been kicked and hit with fists.” Yet she is grateful now, above all, for having escaped coercive sex with her master, whose odious “conduct”—repeated rape—is a subject she alludes to but dares not directly name: “Now, I can lie down at night in peace, —there I had no peace even at night, on account of my master’s conduct” (44). Her self-portrait is the polar opposite of the Black “Jezebel” in whom “sexual impulse overwhelmed all restraint,” a stereotype perpetrated by White men to “legitimate the[ir] wanton behaviour” (Fox-Genovese 291). Likewise, it provides a stark contrast to what contemporary Black feminist critic bell hooks calls “the mythic black woman in slavery who supposedly ‘vamped’ and seduced virtuous white male slave owners” (hooks 127).

Part of reclaiming Canadian women’s history involves filling the gaps

and rectifying the distortions resulting from the occlusion of the standpoint of enslaved women, the majority of whom were illiterate since most slaves were prohibited by law from learning to read or write. Afua Cooper writes forcefully: “Black women in this country have made history and therefore do have a history. This history must be constructed and made available if we are not to become victims of amnesia” (“Constructing Black Women’s Historical Knowledge” 39). The very act of narrating or writing down these stories in the first person may be understood as a primal recognition of how the personal is political and vice versa, and it is a fundamental form of resistance to erasure, silencing, distortion, and forgetting. These narratives are courageous examples of, quite literally, speaking truth to power. Until the 1980s, the law in Canada did not recognize marital rape, and until the 1990s, the United Nations did not specify sexual assault as a separate crime of war. Today when, in Canada, nine out of ten sexual assaults go unreported (Statistics Canada 16) and a blame-the-victim attitude sometimes still prevails, the testimony of these early women about coercive sex, shaped by a White amanuensis or editor and articulated through cautious circumlocution though it may be, is, according to most critics now, nothing short of heroic.<sup>10</sup> Maureen Elgersman’s 1999 study of Black women slaves in early Canada and Jamaica tellingly is entitled *Unyielding Spirits*.

Twentieth-century editors of Prince’s narrative, including Moira Ferguson and Henry Louis Gates Jr., believe that Mary Prince “proclaimed a vigorous sense of self, [and] turned upside down the usual presentation of slavery by describing the black experience from the inside, and the white experience from the outside” (Ferguson 6; qtd. in Rauwerda 407), and that her story “celebrates [Black women’s] transformation into subjects, subjects as defined by those who have gained a voice (Gates xv). That the stakes were incredibly high is evidenced by the spate of articles and the legal suits brought by both her anti-slavery publisher, Thomas Pringle, and Mary Prince’s last owner, John Wood, following the publication of her *History*. One pro-slavery advocate, James McQueen, published three articles which challenged the credibility of Prince’s story and attacked Pringle’s decision to withhold a section in a letter from Wood which alleged her “baseness” and “sexual depravity.” McQueen denounced Prince in the *Glasgow Courier* (July 1831) as a “prostitute” who was “addicted” to “immoral habits” (qtd. in Thomas 118). In *Blackwood’s Magazine* (November 1831), he denounced Pringle, in whose home Prince had found refuge, for indulging in “secret closetings” with her and of having a prurient interest in “black filth, debauchery, and uncleanness” (qtd. in Thomas 118). Pringle decided to sue Cadell, *Blackwood’s* London-based publisher, for libel, since McQueen’s residency in Glasgow put him beyond the jurisdiction of the English courts (Thomas 114). Pringle won, but was awarded only a nominal five pounds, with costs (Thomas 119).

This was not the end. As the only of Prince’s owners identified by name and scandalized by her account, John Wood sued Pringle as

publisher of *The History*, claiming that Prince's work had "endeavoured to injure the character of my family by the most vile and infamous falsehoods" (*The History of Mary Prince* 40). Wood won this case but, like Pringle, he was awarded very little money (25 pounds), with no costs (Thomas 114). While 25 pounds may sound as if it might be a reasonable amount in 1831, it is paltry when one considers that it cost Wood ten times that much to bring the suit (114). Like the earlier story of Angélique, some of Mary Prince's story is thus also recorded subsequently in the form of sworn testimony.<sup>11</sup> Most importantly, her *History* is credited with directly contributing to the abolition of slavery in the British colonies just two years after its publication.

For many reasons, then, we find it important to draw attention to the theme of resistance to slavery in four selected narratives, two largely historical and two largely fictional, by and/or about heroic women connected to Canada at some level: the personal testimony of two enslaved Black women, Marie-Joseph Angélique in eighteenth-century New France and Mary Prince several generations later in the West Indies, and the imagined stories of three fictional slave women: Dionne Brand's Marie Ursule and her daughter Bola in nineteenth-century Trinidad, and Lawrence Hill's Aminata Diallo, whose story spans West Africa, the Thirteen Colonies, Nova Scotia, and ultimately London—at about the same period leading up to abolition when the historic Mary Prince found freedom there. Differences are striking with respect to narratological perspective, genre, and author's gender in these four powerful rebel histories in which strong women not only endure, but, through their stories, prevail.

The earliest of these narratives is Marie-Joseph Angélique's; a Portuguese-born, young, Black slave woman, she was transported across the Atlantic, sold in New England for a barrel of gunpowder in 1725, and brought to New France by her owner (*Angélique* 87). Nine years later, she was accused of starting a fire that destroyed her widowed mistress's house and a large part of old Montreal; she was imprisoned, put through a two-month trial, tortured, mutilated, publicly hanged, and then burned. Her story of resistance and revolt, forgotten for centuries, in recent years has informed several artistic and scholarly works in various genres, including an entry in the reference work *100 Canadian Heroines: Famous and Forgotten Faces* by Merna Forster, and a biography, *The Hanging of Angélique*, by Afua Cooper, both historians.<sup>12</sup> The transcript of Marie-Joseph Angélique's so-called "confessions," taken down in French by the chief investigator, "given the early date of the trial, 1734," according to Afua Cooper, "constitutes the first slave narrative in North America" (*Angélique* 293). Her recorded testimony is identified by George Elliot Clarke as "a *de facto* slave autobiography" (*Odysseys Home* 70).

A hundred years after Marie-Joseph Angélique, Mary Prince fled from slavery in the West Indies to London, England, where she told her story to Susanna Strickland, an abolitionist (and, later, under her married name of Moodie, a pioneer Canadian author). *The History of Mary Prince*,

*A West Indian Slave*, 1831, the first narrative of a Black woman published in England (Salih vii), provides the first detailed depiction of a slave woman's life in a British colony. Like these authentic slave narratives, recent fictionalized neo-slave narratives, such as Dionne Brand's *At the Full and Change of the Moon* or Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes*, also depict extraordinary resilience and resistance. All of these texts underscore the importance of naming, the power of words, the moral necessity of a nation's remembering, and the particular circumstances of slave women.

Afua Cooper argues that “[t]he sense of self depends on having a sense of one's past, and to the extent that modern women have been denied, in the historical canon, all but the faintest glimpses of their own history, they are like victims of amnesia” (“Constructing Black Women's Historical Knowledge” 41). For those women who are marginalized, not only on the basis of sex, but also on the basis of race, class, religion, disability, or other factors of social location, such victimization and erasure are compounded. Cooper continues: “Black women's history has been at worst invisible, and at best marginal in the history of all Canadian histories, be they ‘malestream’ or women's/feminist history” (39). Our main point is that, as we re-vision history and literary studies in this new millennium, the stories of the most marginalized women—women enslaved—must become part of Canada's evolving narrative of nation and of world literature.

### *The Hanging of Angélique* (2006)

The story of Marie-Joseph Angélique, slave to a wealthy fur merchant and his wife in eighteenth-century Montreal, is an epic story that spans Europe and North America. It also spans the whole gamut of a woman's unflagging resistance, from “sass,” flight, and possibly infanticide of children conceived through acts of rape, to her final act of firing the “great” house—and with it half of old Montreal. Arrested and put on trial, experiencing unimaginable hostility and crushing torture, Angélique shows extraordinary fortitude and dignity; she refuses to name any accomplice: “C'est moi! It's me and no one else” (Cooper, *Angélique* 18).

Briefly, the Canadian portion of Angélique's story is this. In 1725, at the age of 20, the young slave woman was bought and brought to Montreal to work in the home and on the nearby farm of François Poulin de Francheville and his wife. She bore three children, none of whom survived infancy, sired possibly by another slave or by de Francheville himself: the baptismal certificate of at least one of these children stated “father unknown,” an expression often used as a cover-up to hide White paternity, frequently that of the owner of the slave mother. Moreover, a slave mother who gave birth to a child fathered by her master generally bore the brunt of his wife's jealous rage. It is significant, as Angélique's

trial documents show, that when her husband died, Thérèse de Couagne, his widow, stopped beating her slave woman (174). Still Angélique demanded to be set free, cursed her mistress, called her a “bitch,” disobeyed her, and, when she learned she was to be separated from her lover, a French indentured servant, and sold down-river to Québec City, ultimately threatened to murder and “roast” Thérèse (172–73).

As critics such as Margaret Washington confirm, “[j]ealousy and hostility of white mistresses toward enslaved women for sexual reasons are well documented” (62), which supports the interpretation of Thérèse here, although Angélique, on trial for her life, does not make specific accusations of sexual exploitation against de Francheville. It was more than a hundred years later, in the US in 1861, that Harriet Jacobs and Louisa Picquet both revealed their forced sexual history with a White man. While they are credited by Washington with being the first “enslaved women [who] discussed publicly this aspect of slave life” (64), surely the refugee American slaves Mrs. Gowens and Mrs. Ellis, who found safety in Canada and in 1856 recorded brief statements of their masters’ misconduct, deserve recognition also.

Angélique was implicated in a fire two months before the great fire; she and her lover Thibault failed in their attempt to escape since snow showed the trail of their footsteps. She very likely set the subsequent fire which destroyed not only homes, but also old Montreal’s hospital and convent. The evidence was all circumstantial, however. Angélique confessed only under extreme torture after having already been judged guilty. Angélique’s story, typical of much African Canadian writing, highlights resistance, concerns community history, and reassesses Canadian identities (Centre for the Study of Black Cultures in Canada; Black; Dabydeen; Elliott). As Afua Cooper sums up: “When Angélique faced the judges of New France, she ushered in a new tradition in Black women’s and Black men’s storytelling. She demanded her place in history and made visible the enslaved as a thinking, feeling, intelligent, and complex human. From her lineage would spring such *resister-storytellers* as . . . Sophia Pooley, Mary Prince, Henry Bibb, Harriet Jacobs, [and] Frederick Douglass” (306, our italics).

### *The History of Mary Prince* (1831)

Mary Prince’s story was written down by abolitionist Susanna Strickland a generation before Sojourner Truth’s *Narrative* was told to Olive Gilbert (1850) or Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was produced with editorial assistance from Lydia Maria Child (1861). Prince’s subjectivity comes through compellingly, though her experience is clearly passed through the filtering lens of her English amanuensis. In a letter about her marriage ceremony which both Pringle and Prince attended, Strickland writes that Prince calls her her “dear Missie and



Biographer.”<sup>13</sup> The term seems to fill the middle ground between Prince’s title, “*History*,” and her subtitle, “*Related by Herself*.” The implications of Prince’s telling her own story—and in print—are enormous, as Barbara Baumgartner, like Ferguson and Gates, highlights: “Still legally owned by a white slaveholder when narrating her story. . . . Prince speaks out against the institution and its proponents” (253). How did she come to have such courage?

Initially, the young Prince draws sustenance from a close bond with her mother and her sisters. After the family is split up, Prince’s comments about their overwhelming grief are a critique of one of the fundamental rationalizations for slavery, that Africans had no feelings: “Oh the Buckra people who keep slaves think that black people are like cattle, without affection. But my heart tells me it is far otherwise” (18). Prince also develops a deep bond with her first mistress, similar to the one she has with her mother. As Baumgartner observes, “Prince speaks of Mrs. Williams as occupying a significant emotional position in her life: ‘Next to my mother, [I] loved her better than any creature in the world’” (255). Even after she is hired out to another mistress, Prince asks permission to visit Mrs. Williams and is genuinely devastated by her death.

Furthermore, after Prince is forcibly separated from her mother, other slaves substitute for her emotionally in times of need. As soon as she arrives at the new household, two slave women comfort her and encourage her to “keep a good heart, if you are to live here” (13). In this brutal household of Captain and Mrs. I—, whose sadistic punishments “seem to have been of a sexual nature” (Salih ix), Prince mercifully encounters another “friendly face” (13). Hetty, an older slave, takes on a maternal role and treats Prince so well that she thinks of her as a relative, her “Aunt.” When the latter dies a short time after being abused and giving birth to a stillborn child, Prince is devastated.

Hetty’s relationship to Prince has been identified as one of “othermothering,” a mothering role with its origins in African cultures.<sup>14</sup> “Othermothering” is the nurturing of children by women who are not related to them by blood but who take on the role of mothering them. (Similar instances of “othermothering” are evident in *The Book of Negroes*, discussed below.) Such enduring emotional bonds amongst slave women are a source of strength, what Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* labels “the politics of empowerment,” and thus a potent form of resistance.

In much of the literature about slavery, the female slave is depicted as a sexualized object. Lindon Barrett has observed that male slave narrators use the body of the adult female slave to highlight the evils of slavery, while female narrators tend to refrain from this (431), perhaps out of a legitimate fear of a blame-the-victim response or simply as being too indelicate a subject. In *The History* the first major reference to Prince’s body occurs when she explains her humiliating sale: “I was soon surrounded by strange men, who examined me in the same manner that a butcher would a calf or a lamb he was about to purchase, and who talked

about my shape and size in like words—as if I could no more understand their meaning than dumb beasts” (11). Although her body is being objectified, Prince retains narrative control: she does not go into specific details as to which parts of her body are touched (unlike Lawrence Hill’s *Aminata*). Moreover, the way she likens the buyer to a butcher impugns his dehumanizing conduct and conveys her censure and moral outrage.

Prince speaks out against several forms of abuse and injustice: when one of her masters physically abuses his daughter, she intervenes at great risk to herself. Prince criticizes her working conditions, leading to allegations of insubordination, and she details the brutality of her physical punishments. She hints at sexual abuse also. Given her status, these actions demonstrate enormous courage. Salih speculates that the “sinister sadism” of Prince’s master, Captain I–, is “diplomatically glossed over in the *History*, since Prince and her allies at the Anti-Slavery Society were probably anxious to spare the prudish sensibilities of potential readers who may have been too squeamish to face the truth about the sexual exploitation of black women by their white masters” (ix). Prince’s description of her aversion to helping her “indecent master,” Mr. D—, at his bath as he demands, beating her if she refuses to do as she is told, is as explicit as she (or Strickland) dares to be in attacking the myth of Black promiscuity. Mr. D— has since been identified as “Robert Darrell, a Turks Island salt proprietor from Bermuda” (Maddison-MacFadyen). Prince’s bravery in laying responsibility for Black women’s sexual exploitation on White men even to this extent is remarkable at a time when a wife also was legally treated as property and had no right to refuse her husband’s sexual advances (Shanley 157; qtd. in Rauwerda 409). The backlash was immediate. Her “allegations of sadistic cruelty and hints of sexual abuse at the hands of West Indian masters outraged the pro-slavery forces including the last owner of Mary Prince [John Wood]” (Kiple 742).

Contrary to the myth of the passive slave, slaves did heroically resist their lot. Prince’s steadfast and spirited resistance to slavery culminates in her journey to England, where she shares her story with British abolitionists, bares her scarred back as proof of her veracity, defends herself despite mockery and laughter at trial, and, in 1828, petitions the House of Commons for her freedom back in Antigua—five years before slavery is officially abolished in the British Empire. Prince’s story is still singled out today for its astonishing power, an “extraordinary testament of ill-treatment and survival [which] was a protest and a rallying-cry for emancipation that provoked two libel actions and ran into three editions in the year of its publication” (Penguin Classics edition, back cover). Two years later, on August 23, 1833, the Slavery Abolition Act outlawed slavery in the British colonies. On August 1, 1834, all slaves in the British Empire were emancipated, although still usually indentured to their former owners in an apprenticeship system,<sup>14</sup> until it, too, was finally abolished in 1838.

Both Angélique’s and Prince’s narratives thus create “new and alternative knowledge that [stands] in opposition to the discourses on

Black people produced by Whites,” or that typically produced on women by men (Cooper, *Angélique* 300–01). Fictional neo-slave narratives by and/or about women continue this tradition. Neo-slave novels, like historical slave narratives, use the leitmotifs of resistance and freedom and are based on the perspective of a slave protagonist. Neo-slave narratives often feature “postmodernist strategies of flashbacks, cyclical time, and fragmented prose” (Tillet 913). In the Canadian literary context, two superb examples, both of them focused on women’s experience and (to differing degrees) grounded in historical research, are Dionne Brand’s *At the Full and Change of the Moon* (1999), set mostly in the nineteenth century, and Lawrence Hill’s *The Book of Negroes* (2007), set mostly in the eighteenth.

*At the Full and Change of the Moon* (1999)

Brand’s novel opens in Trinidad in 1824, where Marie Ursule plots a mass suicide of militant slaves, while sparing her young daughter Bola. The interconnected stories of six generations of Marie Ursule’s descendants map a matrilineage of the Black Diaspora, confirming its motherlode of strength and fecundity. Marie Ursule is referred to as the “queen of the Convoi Sans Peur; queen of rebels, queen of evenings, queen of malingerings and sabotages; queen of ruin” (5). She has had the tips of her ears cut off for insolence and rebellion, was made to walk behind her owner on a rope, has been flogged with thirty-nine lashes, and was shackled with a ten-pound iron ring around one ankle for two years for her role in a failed rebellion five years earlier, in 1819. Her brutal mistreatment has given her a permanent limp, but beyond this “she had been given a heart full of curses and patience” (5). She bides her time until 1824 when she prepares a poison for all the rebels to escape—through suicide. She has also, as she says, “washed out many from between her legs,” meaning that she has aborted her own fetuses for “she had vowed never to bring a child into the world, and so to impoverish de Lambert [her master] with barrenness as well as disobedience” (8).

In the Acknowledgements to the novel, Brand notes that the character of Thisbe as described in V. S. Naipaul’s *The Loss of Eldorado: A History* (1969) is her source for Marie Ursule (302). In 1802 Thisbe “was hanged, mutilated and burnt, her head spiked on a pole, for the mass deaths by poisoning on an estate. At her hanging she was reported to have said, ‘This is but a drink of water to what I have already suffered’” (301–02). Brand’s Marie Ursule, leader of the Sans Peur [without fear] Regiment, has plotted one insurrection already with regiments from two neighbouring estates, to round up the planters and kill them, but the plot was betrayed; this time the strategy is to kill themselves with the poison *woorara*, to “wash themselves of this life . . . Who didn’t die, Marie Ursule knew, would be no good after and de Lambert would die too in his

own way” (16–17). De Lambert finds her before the poison has killed her, however; “they broke her arms dragging her,” they spend a week torturing and sentencing her, then they hang and burn her—which was Angélique’s ultimate fate also. As they put the rope around Marie Ursule’s neck, again like Angélique, “she confessed gladly to her own name alone” (21).

Bola, the one child Marie Ursule has borne and spares by sending her away to Terre Bouillante, is like a force of nature, tumbling out of her mother like an “ocean,” all “balled into a moon” (8). In the dense and evocative poetic language of the novel, the map of Trinidad is said to look “more and more like a map of the ocean,” and we are apprised of the fact that “[a]t the full and change of the moon the sea will rise four feet perpendicular” (53). Bola, the Trinidadian moon-child born a slave, over the course of a lifetime that lasts a century, reclaims the fertility and erotic pleasures that her mother denied herself; she takes many lovers and “spread her children around so that all would never be gathered in the same place to come to the same harm” (198). Bola lives from 1821 to 1921, a mythic hundred years, and her progeny thrive on both sides of the Atlantic, in Trinidad, Venezuela, Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium, the US, and Canada, the generations interconnecting North America, Europe, India, and Africa. Yet, as Marlene Goldman and other critics have pointed out, there is no ultimate sense of home or of belonging. Bola insists: “No one is anyone’s” (298).

Not only Marie Ursule’s daughter but also her great-great-great-granddaughter, born in 1982, is named Bola. This Bola’s mother lives in Toronto, her father is from Ghana; their union is fleeting, and the young Bola, like her namesake, is sent to Terre Bouillante, Trinidad, where, at sixteen, she is thrown out of school, seemingly mad, conversing with ghosts, for she says, “I remember everyone” (289). At the end, we are told that the first “Bola has her own hymn, ‘Life will continue,’ she tells the children, ‘no matter what it seems, and even after that someone will remember you’” (297–98). The novel’s narrative structure, wave-like, disrupted, repetitive, implies a kind of fluid continuity, as indeed the stories of “great Mama Bola” (247) with her life-affirming, independent spirit are passed on to at least some of the far-flung matrilineage. Thus these texts, in their various ways, respond to, critique, and reconstruct Canadian narratives of nation, which, like most of Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities,” typically centre around men with power. Moving beyond a politics merely of rejection of or disaffiliation from patriarchal power structures of dominance, these texts work to reclaim and redefine women’s power inside a matriarchal ethic of care and connection. This can be demonstrated again with respect to *The Book of Negroes*.

*The Book of Negroes* (2007)

Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes*—published as *Someone Knows My Name* in the United States, Australia, and New Zealand (Hill, Home page)—recounts the life story of the fictional Aminata Diallo, who is captured as an eleven-year-old girl in the interior of West Africa and survives the Middle Passage to the Thirteen Colonies. Later, after the American War of Independence, she joins the Black Loyalists in their exodus to Nova Scotia and, ten years later still, is one of about a thousand Nova Scotia Blacks who make their way to Sierra Leone in the first Back-to-Africa movement. Initially, as a young child in Africa, she wears down her father's reluctance to teach her, a female, to read the Koran. Later, in her captivity, this spirit of determination is reinforced by her witnessing the rebellious behaviour of Fanta, the chief's third wife, a role model and symbol of resistance. Aminata's spirit of resistance grows stronger still as Biton, a former chief, convinces her to assist in organizing a shipboard revolt. The revolt fails and many are killed, but Aminata and others survive the Middle Passage by sheer force of will.

During the Atlantic crossing, the ship's doctor attempts to rape her, but she is able to dissuade him by threatening him with spiritual retribution: "Don't do that, or my father will return from the dead to strike you down" (74). However, newly purchased in America, Aminata is raped by her first owner, Robinson Appleby, in South Carolina, who is motivated by economic lust to increase the number of his slaves and by power lust to demonstrate his domination, "to own all of me" (161). Justifying his appalling actions to himself, he finishes his assault by calling her "African whore" (161). She is still very young and unable physically to resist, but she is able to thwart his effort at procreation by accepting an abortifacient from a sister slave and healer.

Several transient "othermothers" assist Aminata on her way to the coast, as she crosses the Atlantic, and again in North America. In captivity, Fanta becomes very protective towards Aminata. The most poignant moment occurs after Aminata steps on a dead person for the first time. It is a traumatic moment that threatens her sanity, but Fanta intervenes and reassures her that the corpse does not have human attributes any more. Similarly, the women who attend Aminata following the onset of her first menstruation, tend to both Aminata's material and emotional needs, as her own mother might have at this signature event marking the transition from girl to woman. Even in North America, far removed from the African continent, Aminata finds another "othermother." Georgia, an elderly slave, protects her as much as she can from being sexually assaulted by her owner, and after the sexual assault occurs, she mitigates its consequences by providing an abortifacient, caring for Aminata, and inspiring her with the fierce strength to survive.

Later Aminata refuses to be labeled either as a slave or an African; she says: "I belong to nobody, and I am not an African. I am a Bamana.

And a Fula. I am from Bayo near Segu. I am not what you say” (122). In an interview, Hill explains that Aminata’s seeming rejection of African identity is rooted in her conception of her world, which does not include the whole continent or the name “Africa,” a White man’s construct.

She is not insulted because she has any shame with regard to Africa. She is insulted because she has never heard the word before. She is from Bayo, born in 1745; she is not walking around there with Africa in her self-concept. She is from Bayo, she is of various ethnic origins, she knows who her parents are and who the people around her are, but “African” is a foreign concept. It’s a white man’s word, really, and it’s a word that other people use to define the people of Africa. (“Projecting History Honestly” 311-12)

Aminata is here asserting her identity as she, and no one else, defines it, a declaration of independence much like that of Brand’s Bola or Cooper’s Angélique. It is a rejection of subjection under the metanarratives of colonization and slavery and an assertion of herself as a speaking subject.

Aminata’s most significant act of resistance, ultimately, may be her literacy. Slaves are not permitted to learn, but Aminata is schooled by Solomon Lindo, her Jewish master in Charles Town, South Carolina, who wants to make a living off her knowledge. She runs away from him eventually, but, when she is recruited by the British in New York during the American War of Independence, her education gives her the ability to register other slaves in a ledger from which Lawrence Hill’s novel takes its title, *The Book of Negroes*. Although she is told simply to list their names, she resists this and includes a unique piece of information about each registrant; she thus acts as a witness to the slaves’ experiences and asserts their individuality, preserving realities that would otherwise remain untold and thus in her own way reshaping the historical record.

Given her character as a resister, it is not surprising that Aminata is amongst the Black Loyalists in Nova Scotia so critical of their neglect and mistreatment by the British that they head back to Sierra Leone, which unfortunately proves to be an illusory refuge. At the novel’s end, Aminata is campaigning with the abolitionists in England to end slavery, an extension of her life-long resistance. She fights the attempt to exploit her story for propaganda purposes and insists on telling her story her way: “My story is my story and it will be published by the one who lets my words stand” (469). She has fulfilled her life-long ambition of becoming a “grand *djeli*” (469), a storyteller.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the writers of historical fiction and recuperators of neglected testimony by enslaved women give memories tongue and keep some version of the ancestors alive, an antidote to cultural “amnesia” and spiritual dispossession, teaching us human history even at its most inhumane and tragic as in the African Holocaust. Women’s slave

narratives, oral and written, reconstruct historical knowledge and, importantly, explore intersections of gender, race, and class as they expose Black women's sexual exploitation by their White masters and implicate the slaveholders' often hostile wives; they recover lost voices in the Canadian "mosaic," enrich transnational traditions of Black feminist or "womanist" literature, document that indeed the "subaltern" can speak, and bear potentially healing witness, naming not only the excruciating realities of slavery and the brutal suffering of those enslaved, but also documenting Black women's courage and agency, individual and collective, in survival, resistance, and rebellion. Slave women's stories are part of Canadian history and of humanity's heritage.

At the beginning of a new millennium, as we engage in the processes of "rethinking beginnings" in Canadian literature (Brydon 6), of "resituating" Canadian literary studies in a "TransCanLit" context (Kamboureli), and of conjoining the humanities "with the ethical activism of the international human rights political movement" (Stanton; qtd. in Franklin, 284), we have the opportunity and the responsibility, as custodians and critics of culture and teachers of literature, to talk about the intersectionality of sexism and racism in the past and the present, to expand the canon, and to let Black women's words stand. If, as Nussbaum argues, there is a role for the literary imagination in public life, then it follows that there is also a role for professors of literature. As these feminist critics and others are arguing anew,<sup>15</sup> women's rights are human rights, and human rights are the purview of the humanities.

## Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at a conference on Literature for Our Times, the triennial ACLALS conference held in Vancouver at the University of British Columbia in August 2007.

2. As the website for Uncle Tom's Cabin Historic Site notes, "In 1983, Josiah Henson became the first person of African descent to be featured on a Canadian stamp. In 1999, the Government of Canada erected a plaque designating him as a Canadian of National Historical Significance" (Ontario Heritage Trust). See also Fritz 56.

3. One exception was Upper Canada (Ontario) after 1793. Under the administration of Lieutenant Governor John Graves Simcoe, the Act Against Slavery was passed that allowed for the gradual abolition of slavery: slaves already in the colony would remain enslaved until death, but no new slaves could be brought into Upper Canada, and children born to female slaves would be freed at age 25. See Winks; Alexander and Glaze; and Trudel.

4. On Canadian identity and fairness, see Razack 9. See also Saul; and Strong-Boag et al. On human trafficking and sexual slavery in Canada, see Perrin, who estimates that more people work and live in slave-like conditions today “than during any other period of history” (7).

5. In 2005, Michaëlle Jean, born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, the descendant of slaves, was appointed Governor General of Canada, the first African Canadian woman to hold this position. The year 2007 marked the two-hundredth anniversary of the official abolition of the slave trade in Britain and its former colonies; 2008, in the United States. The November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2008, election of the first African American president of the United States, and his inauguration on January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2009, are clearly defining moments in American history. In his first speech as President-elect, Barack Obama referenced slavery, and pointed out 106-year-old Ann Nixon Cooper, “born just a generation past slavery.” She had been denied basic human rights earlier in her life on two counts—being a woman and Black.

6. See also Robbins.

7. See Bristow, et al.

8. Fulton’s note continues: “In her narrative, Harriet Jacobs relates a situation in which a slave mother is sold because she disclosed her master as the father of her child.” Jacobs observes, “She had forgotten that it was a crime for a slave to tell who was the father of her child” (16).

9. Rauwerda, however, focuses less on Prince’s agency and more on how “manipulated and externally constructed” by Strickland and Pringle her narrative is (399).

10. Some of the details in the sworn testimony differ from her published narrative. See Rauwerda.

11. In the 1980s and 1990s, several plays, novels, and films in English and French were produced about Angélique, and a study of her trial was made by historian Denyse Beaugrand-Champagne. More bibliographic information is given by George Elliot Clarke in his Foreword to Cooper’s *The Hanging of Angélique* (xv).

12. Rauwerda draws attention to Strickland’s letter to James Bird dated 9 April 1831, which is published in Moodie 60. However, Rauwerda’s subsequent identification of Thomas Pringle as Prince’s “Biographer” is erroneous. Strickland, who was given in marriage by Thomas Pringle to J. W. Dunbar Moodie, writes: “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.”



13. We are indebted to an anonymous reviewer for the suggestion that we include a brief discussion of “othermothering” here, and for pointing us to Anim-Addo’s fine poem, “Aunt Hetty—Other Mother (after Mary Prince),” and to James’s “Mothering.”

14. However, as an anonymous reviewer noted, Bermuda and Antigua did not introduce an apprenticeship system.

15. See also Coundouriotis and Goodlad.

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