

EARLY MODERN WORKSHOP: Jewish History Resources

**Volume 8: Egodocuments: Revelation of the Self in the Early Modern Period, 2011,
University of Texas at Austin**

Revealing, Concealing: Ways Of Recounting The Self In Early Modern Times

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The study of autobiography has enlarged dramatically since Georg Misch pronounced in his magisterial study a half century ago that it was at best a European genre, with individual consciousness at its core, germinating in Augustine's Confessions and fully blossomed in the Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In contrast to his view, multiple forms of self-narrative have been discovered even within the bounds of Christian Europe, composed by women and men, artisans and workers along with the learned and great— even dictated by those unable to wield a pen. Webs of family consciousness have turned out to be as much a stimulus as concern for the self, even for a man as devoted to inner exploration as Michel de Montaigne. Indeed, just following Misch's canon, we note that Augustine, son of a Berber mother, was writing his Confessions of and from North Africa, that Michel de Montaigne (like Saint Teresa) had conversos in his background, and that Jean-Jacques Rousseau left his native Geneva for France.

Likewise, evidence for Jewish autobiography has multiplied since Judah Goldin pointed out in his foreword to a volume of Hebrew ethical wills that these death-bed texts were partway to a self-portrait. In 1976, when Goldin wrote those words, if one wanted to go beyond the excerpts valiantly published by Leo Schwarz in his Memoirs of My People Through a Thousand Years to get to a printed edition or responsible translation of the known classics of early modern Jewish autobiography -- say, Asher Halevi from Alsace, Leon Modena of Venice, Glikl Hamel of Hamburg and Metz, and Jacob Emden of Altona-- one had available only the editions of central or eastern European scholars from the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. The picture is different today, with critical editions of at least some

of these autobiographies newly published, and many more early modern self-narratives unearthed, as exemplified in our conference itself.

Interestingly enough, the recognition of the importance of Arabic self-narrative has a similar rhythm. Back in 1485, the Egyptian jurist and man of letters Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti opened his autobiography with an affirmation of abundance:

Scholars from ancient to modern times have continually written biographical accounts of themselves. They have done so with praiseworthy intentions, among which is “speaking of God’s bounty” in thanks, and also to make known their circumstances in life so that others might emulate them. . . , so that those who do not know of these circumstances should learn of them, and so that whosoever might later wish to mention them in works of history or in biographical dictionaries might draw upon their accounts.

Al-Suyuti then named nine predecessors from the last three centuries, who had written autobiographies either as separate works or as part of history books or of biographical dictionaries.¹

Despite this, in 1937, when the great scholar Franz Rosenthal made a compilation of Arabic autobiography over many centuries, he knew of only twenty-three texts in all, and his negative judgment of them echoed the narrow criteria of Georg Misch, for whom Rousseau’s individualism was the touchstone. “None of the[se Arabic] autobiographies,” said Rosenthal, “came into being out of a consciousness of the individual value of the uniquely personal.” (A rare exception in western scholarship was Shmuel Goitein, who brought the social and cultural activities of the medieval Mediterranean to life through his research on the fragments from the Cairo Geniza. Such experience opened Goitein to the multiple genres and rhetorical devices in Arabic self-narratives and led him to comment in 1977, “I was impressed by the endless number of individuals whose personality is clearly brought out, in one way or another, by these ancient Arabic narratives.”)

Against the standard view, Dwight Reynolds led a team of scholars to produce a volume in 2001 entitled *Interpreting the Self*, which documents and gives theoretical grounding to the copious Arabic autobiography over the centuries. Not surprisingly, the book begins with a chapter on “The Fallacy of Western Origins” and argues for a less parochial concept of

notions of the self and how it can be narrated. It seems to me that our work on Jewish self-narrative can contribute to this goal as well.

This afternoon, I'd like to consider certain features of that self-presentation in early modern times, stressing what people decided to reveal and especially to conceal about themselves. Let's start with the essential question of the frame: the genre in which a man or woman has chosen to speak about the self and the audience he or she expects for the account. The stand-alone life is the most recognizable model. To give three seventeenth-century examples: the merchant Glikl Hamel wrote her life — her husbands, her children, her business, her worries and moral reflections, punctuated by folk tales --in Yiddish for her “dear children and grandchildren.” The learned rabbi Leon Modena wrote his life, Hayyei yehuda, Life of Judah — his preaching triumphs at Venice and publications, his calamities and gambling, his family – in Hebrew for “my sons, the fruit of my loins and to their descendants, and [for] my students, who are called sons.” Marie de l'Incarnation wrote her spiritual autobiography – her movement from artisan and widowed mother in Tours to mystic and then Ursuline teacher and missionary to the Amerindians of Québec –in French for her son, whom she had abandoned for God years before.

None of these three intended their Lives to be published. Glikl Hamel would have been troubled if her tales had got beyond the family, and that's where her manuscript stayed till 1896. Leon Modena expected some limited circulation among his former Jewish students, but would not have wanted this manuscript to travel much farther. He, too, got his wish, for the first public notice of the Life of Judah was in the mid-nineteenth century at the hands of Jews recording the history of Jewish scholars.

The destiny of Marie de l'Incarnation's spiritual autobiography was different. Encouraged by her confessor to write her Relation, as she called it, Marie had extracted a promise from her son Claude, now a Benedictine in France, either to burn the manuscript after he'd read it or to pass it on to her Ursuline niece. Once she died, the son published the life, with his own commentaries; he included in the preface Marie's letter eliciting his promise that only he and her niece would lay eyes on the manuscript, thus demonstrating to readers his mother's humility about her graces and his own rightful breach of faith in making them available to the world.

Dom Claude had turned his mother's written life into a collaborative venture, but every once in a while an early modern autobiography was born from dictation. The example I want to describe is from 1831, though it recounts the life of a woman born in 1788: The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave. Related by Herself. The first slave narrative we have from the lips of a woman, it was told to a young abolitionist writer, Susanna Strickland, who claimed she was "adhering to [Mary's] own simple story and language," and then was published in London by Thomas Pringle, the secretary of the Society for the Abolition of Slavery. It recounted Mary Prince's early life in Bermuda, where she was sold away from her slave mother, her cruel treatment at the hands of owners there and in Antigua, her conversion to Christianity and marriage to a good black carpenter, the refusal of her brutish owners to let her buy her freedom, and her final escape from them during a visit to England. Printed in three editions in 1831, The History of Mary Prince gave support to the movement that led to the Parliamentary bill of 1833 emancipating the 800,000 slaves in the British West Indies.²

From this sample of stand-alone lives, let's turn to self-narratives that are entwined with or are associated with other genres. I'll start with a form that, like The History of Mary Prince, involves a speaker and a writer: the reports of Christian missionaries about their converts. The Jesuit Relations from Canada in the seventeenth century include long quotations from their converts about life history and emotional transformation, expressed originally in an Algonquian or Iroquoian tongue and translated into French by the Jesuits for publication. The Jesuits were good linguists, but who knows how close these speeches come to the actual words of the Amerindian speaker?

An example to whose reliability I can better attest is drawn from late eighteenth-century Suriname, from its rain-forests, where the Moravian Brethren had been working to for several decades to convert the Maroons. One of their few successes was a man named Alabi, descendant of slaves who had fled from the plantations of Jewish settlers and who was himself heir to the chieftaincy of the Saramacca tribe. His Creole tongue, Saramaccan, was in part derived from the Portuguese spoken by the Jewish settlers; and after his baptism under the name of Johannes Arrabini, he

collaborated with one of the missionaries on a Saramaccan-German dictionary. The Moravian diaries and reports are full of references to and quotations from Alabi, even letters that he dictates in Saramaccan and which the brothers translate into German.

In my past life (they quote him as saying as he neared thirty), I had no peace of mind. First I had to feed my soul [explain jeje, jorka], then I had to pacify my Gado, then I had to placate someone who had recently died so that he would not kill me, then I had to make an Obia and purify [myself with it]. Now I am free from all these burdens, torments, and fears. I thank my beloved Redeemer who has freed me.³

And years later, as he neared sixty, he recounts his past with two old-time converts:

I was the leader at every dance and merriment, as you all know. You also know that as heathen, we indulged in every abomination, in gluttony and drunkenness. I was the chief drummer, and you, Joshua, and you Andreus, were the chief singers and noise-makers. Our women and children danced with us, and we spent whole nights in every kind of profaneness and wild uproar. We carved idols in wood, or formed them of clay, consecrated them, put food and drink before them, commended ourselves to their protection, and fell down with our children prostrate before them, addressing them with great earnestness and telling them our wants, which were connected only with external happiness. We thought we were doing good deeds, but we were worshipping the devil. And yet God had mercy on us.⁴ Alabi's fragments of autobiography ring with vivacity and insight about his young adulthood, and are less formulaic than the lebenslaufen written by Moravian converts in North America.

Another move by those who wanted to recount their own life was to attach it to a biography of others. From medieval times, Arab authors of biographical dictionaries, the tabaqat so beloved by Islamic scholars, would sometimes write his own life and sandwich it in among those of the luminaries. Whatever foibles they might include, they thus became part of a community of people whose credibility could be taken seriously, an important trait in a cultural tradition depending on chains of transmission.

In western Europe, some people linked their story to that of a close relative or eminence. Montaigne compared himself to his father numerous

times in his Essais, and opined that his adult self was in part a fulfillment of his father's design. The scholar Jacob Emden, starting his autobiography when he was in his forties, opened with an account of his ancestors and then branched into a full biography of his father, the renowned rabbi Zevi Hirsh Askhenazi. The complexity in Emden's writing, as he tells his children of God's gifts to him and of his woes, comes from the juxtaposition of biography and autobiography, his own life repeating his father's, but also diverging from it and allowing Emden to state his grievances against his honored progenitor.

Christian women, when not writing as mystics or pilgrims, sometimes used their husbands' lives as a path to self-narrative. For instance, the French Calvinist and noblewoman Charlotte Arbaleste wrote a history of her husband Philippe du Plessis de Mornay, a leading figure in the French Wars of Religion, and was able to thread her life story into his. In seventeenth century England, the Puritan Lucy Apsley Hutchinson appended a brief life of her own to her biography of her husband Colonel John Hutchinson, an important leader in the English Revolution. This format legitimated these women's comments on public life as well as their self-description.

Yet other genre links, even more ambitious, were possible for self-narrative. As the influential representative and defender of Jewish communities in the Holy Roman Empire in the days of Maximilian and Charles V, the Alsatian Joseph of Rosheim wove his own actions and interventions into a Hebrew chronicle of the travails of the times. On a larger scale, the jurist-diplomat-scholar Ibn Khaldun, writing from North Africa in his rhythmic Arabic around 1400, appended his autobiography to the end of his Book of Examples, that celebrated introduction to universal history and account of world history to his own day. His autobiography contributed to the historical narrative itself, as he visited courts from al-Andalus to Cairo and met with the Mongol conqueror Tamberlane in Damascus. But more important, Ibn Khaldun inserted biographies of his teachers and his teachers' teachers into his life story; he thereby established his reliability and worth as a scholar who, as he claimed in the beginning of Book of Examples, was about to give his readers "a new science."

Ibn Khaldun's travels were subsumed under his life history, but other authors made their travel the vector of the narrative and organized their

presentation of self around it. Let me mention two examples here, both dear to my own research. The first is The Book of the Cosmography and Geography of Africa, written in Italian in 1526 by a man known in Europe as “Leo Africanus,” but who had been born al Hasan ibn Muhammad ibn Ahmed al-Wazzan in Granada, about the time that Muslim kingdom fell to its Spanish Catholic conquerors. Brought up and educated in Fez, al-Wazzan became a diplomat for its sultan. In that capacity he traveled throughout North and sub-Saharan Africa, and the eastern Mediterranean to Istanbul. Returning from Cairo to Fez in 1518, his boat was seized by Christian pirates and he was delivered to Pope Leo X, who, beside being a patron of letters and art, was trying to raise a crusade against the Turk. After a year’s imprisonment, al-Wazzan converted to Christianity and was given the pope’s names Giovanni Leone. For the next seven years he remained in Italy, teaching and transcribing Arabic for highly placed persons, preparing an Arabic-Hebrew-Latin dictionary with a learned Jew, and finally writing books—of which the Geography of Africa was the most important—to present the world of Africa and Islam to European readers. In 1527, he returned to North Africa and Islam, probably never to know that his Africa book would be published in 1550 in Venice and become a European bestseller.

The Geography of Africa is a book of mixed genres—a geography, a history, and a travel account, a rihla, a form of writing of long duration in Arabic writing, here produced in Italian. Al-Wazzan organized the book by geographical units: the kingdoms of the Maghreb, with extended treatment of Morocco; the Land of the Blacks; and then Egypt. But as he moves from town to town, village to village, mountain range to desert, he incorporates many stories from his own life as they relate to that place: from his boyhood, where he talks of shrines he visited and his beliefs about djinns, to his adulthood, where he describes dangerous adventures on his caravans, his conversations with diplomats, local Jews, judges, and traders, his reception at different courts, and much more. Facilitated by the travel frame, the portrait that emerges is of a flexible, widely experienced, and well-educated man, with his own judgments, but still curious about different ways that people live and think. We’ll return to this strategy of self-portraiture and its silences in a moment.

My second example is Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Suriname, written in the late 1770s and 1780s by John Gabriel Stedman, and finally published, with illustrations engraved from Stedman's drawings, in 1796 in London. Born in the Netherlands to a Scottish military father and a Dutch mother, Stedman followed his father into the Scots Brigades, while enjoying a free-roving youth in the Netherlands. In 1773, he became a captain in a special unit recruited to help settlers in the Dutch colony of Suriname put an end to Maroon uprisings and raids on the plantations (the rebels were not Alabi's Saramacca, who had already made peace with the colonial government, but another grouping of tribes).

Stedman's Narrative recounts his years in Suriname from his arrival in early 1773 to his departure in the spring of 1777. Like al-Wazzan's Geography, it is a book of mixed genres, here triggered by Stedman's adventures in Suriname. It is a military history, the European soldiers bogged down in the insect-laden swamps of the rain forests, whose pathways the Maroon rebels know perfectly. It describes the flora and fauna of Suriname and gives something of the colony's history; it provides an ethnography of the indigenous peoples who shared the rain forests with the Maroons and of the African slaves who grew the sugar and coffee on the plantations. It offers ethical and political commentary on slavery, condemning strongly the cruel punishment of slaves but defending it as an institution for people of African origin so long as they are humanely treated. And it recounts Stedman's affectionate intimacy with a beautiful young slave named Joanna, their time together, the birth of their son Johnny, and his sorrow at having to leave them behind in Suriname, Joanna still a slave. Throughout Stedman portrays himself as man of sentiment, with empathy for even the Maroons he must kill, indignation at extravagant cruelty, and appreciation for quality wherever he saw it. Here, too, I'll return in a moment to this strategy of self-portraiture and some of the trouble at its heart.

Early modern self-narratives surface in genres other than those I've mentioned so far. For instance, testimony and confessions in criminal trials engender self-portraiture, albeit within a frame established by the authorities. During our workshop, Sara Nalle will lead us through the revealing

testimonies of conversos before the Spanish Inquisition, and I myself have been scavenging criminal records in Suriname as a source for self-narrative from slaves, who otherwise leave us little direct quotation. For now, let me just stress that whatever the genre framing an ego-document, both the genre and the intended audience will have implications for the construction of the self, both for what is said and what is not-said.

What do I mean by the “not-said,” by the silences, and omissions in a self-narrative? I don’t mean some kind of failure of individual consciousness, as if all self-portraits had to be measured by the intentions and practice of Michel de Montaigne. Rather I am inquiring about concealment or omission that is invited by the ego-document itself, that is somehow intrinsic to its story.

Two examples come to mind from Glikl Hamel’s autobiography. The first concerns business, whose ups-and-downs, successes and uncertainties provide a dramatic line throughout her book, from the early achievements of Glikl and her first husband Haim in Hamburg to the spectacular bankruptcy of her second husband Hirsch Levy in Metz. Along the way, Glikl named and denounced business partners who were dishonest and cheated Haim. This was safe enough, for her settling of scores would remain in Hebrew within her family network. Only once she provided no name: a Jewish merchant who, after Haim’s death, had given a bad credit rating to her young and now orphaned trading sons so that they could not get their bills of exchange honored on the Hamburg bourse. Even while calling on God to avenge her sons, Glikl said only of the merchant “I cannot blame the man I have in mind because I do not know his thoughts. Humans judge by what the eyes see, God by the heart.” This man’s power and relation to the family were too important to risk gossip.

This is a minor, tactical concealment. Another silence cuts more deeply into Glikl’s life, that of her range of feeling for Hirsch Levy, her second husband. In the early books of her autobiography, composed not long after Haim Hamel died at age forty-three, she evoked the great love, comfort, and exchange that existed between the two of them, even in times of trouble. Description of intimate feeling was, thus, part of Glikl’s palette for painting her past. She remained a widow for more than a decade, refusing offers from all over Germany, and then in 1699, agreed to marry the

widower Hirsch Levy of Metz, wealthy financier, purveyor to the army of Louis XIV, and leader of the Jewish community.

Glikl's account of the start of this marriage was composed two years after their wedding, in the wake of the spectacular and humiliating bankruptcy of Hirsch Levy. She erupted in anger and self-reproach for having agreed to this marriage, which had so unexpectedly brought her hardship and dishonor. She did not accuse Hirsch of bad business practices—"my husband was a good man and wealthy, as he represented himself to be. . . he carried on a big business and was honest"—it was the fault of his creditors and the times. But this did not lessen her deep disappointment at the misfortune.

But there is a second muted theme in these pages. "I should not have thought of marrying again," she reported to the children who will one day read her book, "for I could not hope to meet another Haim Hamel." As she neared Metz, she was filled with "melancholy" even though her future husband's letters to her had been full of respect and cheerfulness, "Did I have a foreboding of the outcome? Or was my heart troubled at taking another husband?"

Once installed in Hirsch Levy's house where she "saw more gold and silver than [she] had seen in any wealthy man's house in all of Germany," she had frequent reminders from her stepchildren and new in-laws of how things were done by Hirsch's first wife Blumchen, who had died only the year before. And then, Glikl said, "my husband groaned a good deal at night. Many times I asked him what ailed him; he always answered nothing. . . that it was just his nature. . . But since the whole world told me how happily he had lived with his first wife, I imagined that he could not forget her." Her in-laws assured her that he had also groaned at night during his first marriage, but, "at times," said Glikl, "it still bothered me."

In Glikl's relation with Hirsch Levy, we have a story she decided not to tell in all its fulness. In the last book of her autobiography, written in 1715 after Hirsch had been dead for a few years, she still recalls their time of troubles in reduced circumstances, but speaks of Hirsch with respect—for his piety, for the standing he had once had in the community, and the contribution he had made to it—and with empathy for his afflictions. "The Holy One took him to Himself. . . he is gone to his rest, leaving me in

penury and sorrow.” But as for what love there may have been between them, Glikl did not record it for her children.

Leon Modena’s Life of Judah also carries enigmatic passages that invite questioning – as in his reference under “Miseries of my heart” to “My son Mordecai. . . with Raphael Spira . . . and after his death, with the Morisco, may his name be blotted out.” But here I want to stress the other side of the coin: that is, how much is revealed about himself and his Jewish community in the autobiography, written in Hebrew for his sons and his students. Quarrels, conspiracies, and enmities in the Ghetto; Jewish fences in cahoots with Christian thieves; mischievous if beloved sons, quarrelsome if devoted wives; and especially Leon’s own passion for gambling that recurs throughout his whole life, jeopardizing his daughters’ dowries and his family’s well-being: this is the Jewish life that emerges along with Leon’s eloquent sermons and learned publications and those of other Jewish scholars. Leon offered a different picture in his History of the Rites, Customes, and Manner of Life of the Present Jews throughout the World, originally written in Italian for King James I around 1615, and published in Paris in 1637 and the next year in Venice. The feuds of the Ghetto are effaced, and the Christian readers hear only of the “Pitie and Compassion [of the Jewish Nation] toward all people in want”; no word of Jews caught up in games of chance, even on the allowed holidays, like Hanukkah and Purim.⁵

The Hebrew Life of Judah, kept in manuscript, was a safe space for experience and affect that should be kept hidden from the Christians. If Christian habitués of the Ghetto, and there were some in Venice, knew something of these Jewish secrets, the public face of Jewish rites and customs was to be moderate and benevolent, an answer to scholarly anti-Semitic treatises of the day. (aside on Leon’s concerns about the Catholic Inquisition, Jewish doctrine, “nothing but praise”)

The revealing/concealing, truth-telling/dissimulating axes also have their place in the books of Hasan al-Wazzan and John Gabriel Stedman, and in each case, we also have a second source that can illuminate the strategies of their self-narratives. In the Geography of Africa of al-Wazzan, it was his religious positioning he had to obscure. As a Christian in Italy, Giovanni Leone had to write a text which would not offend his Christian readers, on whose favor his life and liberty depended. But as a Muslim, Hasan ibn

Muhammad al-Wazzan had to write a text which, if it fell into Muslim hands, could be defended one day when, as he said, he planned “to return safe and sound, God willing, to North Africa.”

He gives a clue to his strategy in an opening folktale. He had been giving a general review of the virtues and vices of people living in different parts of Africa. But would readers think he himself, as an African, had only the vices and not the virtues? To dissuade them of such judgment, he tells the tale of an amphibious bird, who could live either on the air or in the sea. He stayed with the birds until the king of the birds came around to collect taxes. Whereupon he dove immediately into the water and lived with the fish until the king of the fish came around to collect taxes, when he immediately shot out of the water back to the birds. And so he continued without ever paying taxes.

The author concludes from this that whenever a man sees his advantage, he always follows it . . . I will do like the bird . . . If the Africans are being vituperated, [this writer] will use as a clear excuse that he was not born in Africa, but in Granada. And if the Granadans are being railed against, he will find the excuse that he was not brought up in Granada.

In his book, then, al-Wazzan was promising to truth-tell about Africa and himself but without being pinned down. He gave ample evidence of having lived most of his life as a Muslim and of his Muslim education, though almost always referring to himself as “this writer” or as “he.” (The “I will do like the bird” is one of three or four first-person usages in the 900-page manuscript.) He described the four schools of Islamic law at Cairo with admiration for the debates he had heard; he lauded the insight of the great theologians he had read like al-Ashari and al-Ghazali; he praised the piety of holy men in the Atlas mountains, whom he knew. The criticisms he made were not those of a Christian outsider, but of a Sunni jurist: mockery of popular superstition, condemnation of Shia heresy. He even referred to Muhammad several times as the Prophet. To be sure, he never inserted the invocation which in Muslim writing must always follow the Prophet’s name, such as “may God bless him and give him peace”—but then he did not insert in his manuscript the adjectives of derision —“satanic,” “damnable,” “fraudulent,” and the like—which a Christian author was required to use in referring to Muhammad and his teachings, especially if a convert.

Al-Wazzan's current status as a Christian was revealed to readers only in the colophon of his manuscript, where he used his Christian name "Joan Lione Granatini." He described learned Nestorians and Jacobite monasteries, but steered clear of their Christian doctrine. He referred to a Christian prayer only once, saying that a poison sold in the kingdom of Nubia was so strong that it could kill a man "in the time it would take to say a Pater Noster." Warfare between European Christians and Muslims in North Africa over the centuries and in battles in which he participated, he reported with remarkable balance.

The impartiality in al-Wazzan's book was exceptional for the sixteenth century, both among Muslim and Christian writers. Indeed, his Christian humanist editor, Giovanni Battista Ramusio, strengthened the Christian reference for the 1550 publication in Venice, and among other changes replaced "in the time it would take to say a Pater Noster" with the adverb "suddenly." The translators of the printed French, Latin and English editions went farther. Where al-Wazzan had written in his manuscript that there had been Jewish and Christian kingdoms in Africa "until the coming of the sect of Muhammad. In the year 268 of the Hijra, the people of Libya became Muslims by certain preachers," the French translator said instead "the damnable Mohammedan sect began to spread in the year 268 of the Hijra. Then disciples of Muhammad came to preach . . . and by deceptive words and false exhortations drew the hearts of the Africans to their false and Satanic law."

Still, even in the printed versions of al-Wazzan's book his psychological and spiritual strategies for describing Africa and himself to Europeans—playful, dissimulative, distancing, likening—come through and reveal a person living with a double vision.

The knotty problem in the self-narrative of John Gabriel Stedman in Suriname was otherwise. He, too, indicates its source to readers through a folktale, the story of Inkle and Yarico, much told in Europe since the seventeenth century. Shipwrecked in the Caribbean, the merchant Inkle had been cared for and protected by the lovely Yarico, with whom he had lived in a cave. Inkle persuaded Yarico to come back to England with him, but then, when their boat docked at Barbados, he sold her into slavery.

Stedman is no Inkle, he assures the readers of his Narrative. He tells them that after first seeing the beautiful slave Joanna, “so much distinguished above all the rest of her Species in the colony,” he had poured out to her mistress and to the administrator of her plantation his hope to purchase Joanna, educate her, and “even to make her [his] lawfull Wife in Europe.” He describes their arrangements together in the next years, living some of the time in a little cottage he builds on a plantation where he has a military base and delighting in the birth of their son Johnny. As his departure nears, the self-described impecunious Stedman borrows money from a generous Christian widow, a Mrs. Godefroy, to purchase Joanna, with the agreement that Joanna will be Mrs. Godefroy’s slave until Stedman pays off the debt from Europe. His son Johnny he manages to manumit free of charge.

Mrs. Godefroy then urges Stedman to take Joanna and Johnny on the boat to Europe with him, even though his loan has not been repaid. Stedman then quotes himself, “I [invited] Joanna still to accompany me,” but she refused even if it meant that they would never meet again. She would stay in Suriname “first from a Consciousness that with propriety she had not the disposal of herself – and secondly from pride, wishing in her present condition rather to be one of the first amongst her own class in America, than as she was well convinced to be the last in Europe at least till such time as fortune should enable me to establish her above dependence.”

That time was never to come, Stedman continues in his Narrative. He says nothing about trying to retrieve her, but reports hearing of her death several years later and then says he married a Dutch woman the following spring. He receives his son Johnny to his welcoming arms and raises him with his own children in England. Not only is he no Mr. Inkle, he is man of refined and romantic sensibility who recognizes virtue wherever he sees it and acts with humane judgment.

Stedman’s journal, which he kept all during his Suriname years and afterward, reveals a different story, though not a treacherous Inkle. No sign of any plan early or late to bring Joanna to Europe and perhaps one day marry her, though Stedman does see to it that her reading skills expand. No borrowing from Mrs. Godefroy with promises for repayment, but rather Stedman purchases Joanna for a moderate price, sells her for a profit to Mrs.

Godefroy, with the commitment that the elderly and kindly widow will manumit Joanna one day in her will. Though he hears once from Joanna after his departure, so the journal reveals, he does not write her back, and he weds a Dutch bride before, not after learning of Joanna's death: she died still a slave, for Mrs. Godefroy outlived her. Yet the Suriname journal does show Stedman's affection for Joanna while he's with her—"I make baskets for the girl I love" –and includes a charming drawing of the three of them at their cottage, later reproduced unidentified in the Narrative. He sustained the memory of his son Johnny for his beloved mother, and when Stedman made his will not long before he died in 1797, he asked that the curl of hair that Joanna had given him at his departure be buried with him.

Thus, Stedman emerges not as someone who wanted to relive his early manhood and actually do something different, but as someone who wanted to rethink it and rewrite it in the Narrative both to assign more honor to himself, and also to pay what he saw as tribute to a woman slave of color. His knotty and unstable story stimulated more response than he could have imagined. Critics of slavery and other readers of the Narrative wondered why Stedman had not paid back his debt to Mrs. Godefroy, or opined that Joanna had been wise not to trust how he'd behave if she returned to Europe with him. Others used the Joanna-Stedman tale as ammunition for the abolition of slavery, well beyond anything its author intended.

One of the likely readers of Stedman's book was Susanna Strickland, whom we have met in 1831 taking down the "history" of Mary Prince, the former slave of Antigua. As a final example of revealing/concealing, let us look once again at that History, for it gives us an inkling of what a slave woman might want to say or not say about intimacy with a white man. After the History was first published, the former owners of Mary Prince wrote indignantly to the publisher Thomas Pringle: they defended their reputation, and attacked Mary for "ingratitude" and "depravity," while withholding details "too indecent to appear in a publication likely to be perused by females." Pringle wrote to an abolitionist friend in Antigua who knew Mary Prince and the former owners well. He responded that Mary was "a slave of superior intelligence and respectability." Prior to her marriage, she had "a connexion with a white person a Captain . . . , which I have no doubt was broken off when she became seriously impressed with religion. . . Such

connexions are so common . . . in our slave colonies (he went on). . . that . . . they are considered, if faults at all, so very venial as scarcely to deserve the name of immorality.”

This intimate liaison with a white man had not been recounted in The History. There Mary had said only that after her first prayer meeting with the Moravians, “I felt sorry for my sins. . . I prayed God to forgive me.” A gentleman named Captain Abbot surfaced, but only as a helpful person lending her some money to help buy her freedom. She had paid it back to him when her manumission was denied. For the second and third printings of the best-selling History, published in the same year of 1831, Pringle just added the two letters he’d received as an appendix, creating an interesting dialogue with the Strickland/Mary Prince text.

Two years later the aggrieved former owner sued Pringle for libel, and in the course of the trial we hear Mary Prince’s voice. Here is the report of the Court of King’s Bench:

She had lived seven years before her marriage with Captain Abbot. . . not in the house with him, but slept with him sometimes in another hut which she had . . . One night she found another woman in bed with the Captain in her house. This woman had pretended to be a friend of the witness [Mary Prince]. (laughter) Witness licked her, and she was obliged to get out of bed. (a laugh) The captain laughed, and the woman said she had done it to plague witness. Witness took her next day to the Moravian black leader, when she denied it, and witness then licked her again (a laugh). The woman then complained before a magistrate. . . and when the story was told, they all laughed, and the woman was informed that she must never come again with such tales or she would be put in the stocks . . . She [Mary Prince] parted with Captain Abbot on his killing a man on board one of [her master’s] vessels. She had been a member of the Moravian [Church] and discharged herself in consequence of her connexion with Caption Abbot. She was kept from [attending services] for seven weeks. She told all this to Miss Strickland when that lady took down her narrative.⁶

This fascinating and very believable story Mary Prince and Susanna Strickland decided not to include in the published History. Strickland may have thought it unsuitable for the abolitionist cause and Mary Prince may have preferred to tell it only to her sister slaves and ex-slaves, but not to give

it general circulation among high-minded English reformers. Whatever the case, the tension between the two instances of self-narrative enriches Mary Prince's story rather than undermines it.

Indeed, the two arguments of my talk have been intended to amplify our tools for interpreting self-narratives. The author's choice of genre and audience shapes the channels in which his or her voice can sound, enlarging possibilities in some directions, limiting them in others, offering chances for play, inversion, and transgression. The author's sensibilities further determine what he or she will tell or reshape or try to hide away, but the knots, as I've called them, or shimmers or eruptions in the self-portrait — especially when we can compare two tellings— bring us added appreciation for these people of the past, for their struggle to understand themselves and their hope that their story might make a difference to someone else.

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¹ Citation from Dwight F. Reynolds, ed., Interpreting the Self. Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 2001), “Introduction,” 1-2.

²For further information about Susanna Strickland and Thomas Pringle and this edition, see Natalie Zemon Davis, “Non-European Stories, European Listeners,” Zeitsprünge. Forschungen zur Frühen Neuzeit 7 (2003): 210-12 .

³F. Staehelin, Die Mission der Brüdergemeine in Suriname und Berbice im achtzehnten Jahrhundert, 3 volumes (Paramaribo:C. Kersten, 1913-1919, 3, part 1, 178: diary of Rudolf Stoll, 6 April 1772. Richard Price, Alabi’s World (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 135.

⁴ Staehelin, Mission, 3, part 3, 191, diary entry 3 August 1800; Price, Alabi’s World, 266.

⁵ Leon Modena, The History of the Rites, Customes, and Manner of Life, of the Present Jews, throughout the World, trans. Edmund Chilmead (London: J. Martin and J. Ridley, 1650)., 50.

⁶ The Times (London), no. 15, 101 (1 March 1833: Court of King’s Bench, 27 February 1833, Wood v.Pringle. Wood was awarded damages. The text from the trial is also reprinted in full in appendix 6 of Mary Prince, The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave Related by Herself, ed. Moira Ferguson, revised edition (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997).