Captive Petitions: The Function of Slave Dialect in the Fictional and Transcriptional Texts of Susanna Strickland Moodie

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May I not write in such a stile as this?
In such a method too, and yet not miss
Mine end, thy good? why may it not be done?
Dark Clouds bring Waters, when the bright bring none.
--John Bunyan, The Pilgrim’s Progress

1: Introduction

Susanna Strickland Moodie established her reputation as the most famous English colonial settler in the Canadian literary tradition with the publication of Roughing it in the Bush (1852).¹ In the year prior to the publication of this ‘pioneering’ text, Moodie would relate the events that led to her emigration to Canada in her thinly veiled autobiography Trifles from the Burthen of Life. During the transatlantic voyage from Britain to the New World, for instance, Moodie describes an encounter between her fictional pseudonym, Rachel M., and one Mrs. Dalton, a morally dubious slaveholder from the West Indies to whom Rachel professes antislavery sentiments:

Mrs. Dalton stared at Rachel in amazement. She could not comprehend her enthusiasm—“Who cared for a slave? One would think,” she said, “That you belonged to the Anti-Slavery Society. By the by, have you read a canting tract by that pious fraternity called ‘The History of Mary P-----.’ It is set forth to

¹ Susanna Strickland (b. Suffolk, England, 1803) married John Moodie and emigrated to Canada in 1831 (shortly after the publication of the slave narratives she transcribed). As such, I use “Susanna Strickland Moodie” to emphasize continuity in authorship before and after her marriage.
be an authentic narrative, while I know it to be a tissue of falsehoods from
beginning to end.”

“Did you know Mary P------?”
“Pshaw!—who does? It is an imaginary tale, got up for party purposes.”
“But I do know Mary P------, and I know that narrative to be strictly true,
for I took it down myself from the woman’s own lips.”
“You?”—and Mrs. Dalton started from the ground, as though she had
been bitten by a serpent.
“Yes, me.”
“You belong to that odious society.”
“I have many dear friends who are among its staunch supporters, whose
motives are purely benevolent, who have nothing to gain by the freedom of the
slave, beyond the restoration of a large portion of the human family to their
rights as men.”
“Mere cant—the vanity of making a noise in the world. One of the
refined hypocracies [sic] of life. Good night, Mrs. M.—I don’t want to know any
more of the writer of Mary P------.” (Thurston 1991, 228-9)

This anecdote reflects back upon the controversies that arose twenty years earlier over
Moodie’s role in the transcription of the slave narratives of Mary Prince and Ashton
Warner, two former slaves from the West Indian islands of Antigua and St. Vincent
respectively. In the character of Mrs. Dalton, Moodie neatly renders the angry
repudiations of these works by the so-called ‘West India Interest’—the ever-vocal
proslavery lobby in the British slavery debates of the late eighteenth and early
nineteenth centuries. In Flora Lyndsay (1853), a revised version of Trifles, Moodie further
reinforced the importance of this anecdote by making the slaveholder’s denunciations
ring even louder: here, Mrs. Dalton declares her realization that she ‘has been talking all
this time to the author of Mary P.’ and ‘from this moment, Madam, we must regard
ourselves as strangers. No West Indian could for a moment tolerate the writer of that
odious pamphlet’ (Moodie 1853, 125).

As indicated in the prefaces of The History of Mary Prince and its companion text,
Negro Slavery by a Negro: Being the History of Ashton Warner (1831), tensions over the
authenticity of these works had in fact always been present. In the preface to the History
of Mary Prince, its editor, the abolitionist Thomas Pringle, revealed that

The narrative was taken down from Mary’s own lips by [Strickland]... It was
written out fully, with all the narrator’s repetitions and prolixities, 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. It is
essentially her own, without any material alteration farther than was requisite to
exclude redundancies and gross grammatical errors, so as to render it clearly
intelligible. (Salih 2001, 3)
In an additional short document appended to the Prince text, ‘The Narrative of Louis Asa-Asa, a Captured African,’ the editor indicated that the testimony is given ‘as nearly as possible as in the narrator’s own words, with only so much correction as was necessary to connect the story and render it grammatical’ (Salih 2004, 66). Finally, in the preface to Warner’s narrative, Strickland herself declared that in ‘writing Ashton’s narrative, I have adhered strictly to the simple facts, adopting, wherever it could conveniently be done, his own language, which, for a person in his condition, is remarkably expressive and appropriate’ (Strickland 1831, 15).

As these transcriptional truth claims demonstrate, the relationship between Moodie and the autobiographical subjects for whom she acted as amanuensis is fraught with ambiguity. On the one hand, the transcriber strikes a posture of transparency in documenting the words from ‘Mary’s own lips’ and ‘her exact expressions and phraseology’, adopting Warner’s ‘own language’ and Asa-Asa’s ‘own words’. On the other hand, such claims of unmediated access to these black subjects are troubled by the manipulation of the editor or transcriber (or both): Warner’s own language is only adopted ‘wherever convenient’; Princes’ exact language is altered ‘to exclude redundancies and gross grammatical errors, so as to render it clearly intelligible’; and Asa-Asa is likewise given an unspecified amount of ‘so much correction’. Despite the straightforward intent of these paratexts to reassure the reader that the narratives are unbiased first-person accounts of the horrors of colonial slavery, they undeniably raise questions about the complex role of transcription in the production of these texts. Where, for instance, do the emendations begin and end? How is the speaker’s Afro-Creole or African dialect translated into standard ‘grammatical’ English? How is transcriptional improvement different from creative manipulation, and historical from fictional narrative?

As John Thurston has noted in his critical biography of Susanna Strickland Moodie, ‘[t]he shaping of Mary Prince into an intelligible, linear, grammatically correct narrative has taken this text away from Mary. It is a corporate text—Mary, Susanna, Pringle—that finally only the Anti-Slavery Society could be said to author’ (Thurston 1996, 61). Yet given the dearth of early nineteenth-century black self-representations, particularly of Afro-Creole women, critics have tended to foster readings of the Prince text which abstract Prince’s voice from the text’s corporate authorship (Ferguson 1987; Pouchet Paquet 1992; M’Baye 2009). Moreover, distinctively creole elements have been read both in the texts of Prince and Warner (Aljoe 2001). Nevertheless, a growing critical tradition has continued to complicate the authorial recovery of black agency within these narratives by exploring their colonial and ideological underpinnings (Sharpe 2003; Salih 2004) and by emphasizing the instrumental role of Moodie within these textual productions (Whitlock 2000; Gadpaille 2009).

This study approaches the issue of the narrative’s authorship by focusing on the underexamined role that transcription itself plays within these texts. Specifically, I examine the use of formal standard English (SE) to filter the first-person histories of the slave, and the curious recurrence of ‘slave’ or creole dialect (CD) at key moments within
these works. By developing a trans-generic framework to situate the corpus of Moodie’s writings, I map how the relationship between standard English and creole dialect—the SE-CD contrast—was a central fixture in Moodie’s discursive practices both prior to and following the slave narratives. I illustrate how both her fictional and transcriptional works evidence Moodie’s earlier critical engagement with the politics and aesthetics of modernity and slavery. These critical frameworks, I argue, provide important clues for interpreting how dialect is meant to function within all of these texts: it is through a privileged medium of ‘captive’ speech that slaves impart various lessons to those interlocutors (and by extension readers) whose minds and hearts are capable of receiving the slave’s impression.

2: Representation of Slave Dialect in Moodie’s Writings

2.1: Slave dialect in the 1831 slave narratives

As discussed in §1, the emendations and improvements made to the 1831 slave narratives by the editor or amanuensis (or both) qualify the introductory claims of transcriptional transparency (Salih 2004, 133). While these editorial interventions may seem especially onerous given the almost total formalization of the speakers’ dialect into standard English, recent theories on the political and formal dimensions of the transcription process illustrate how all acts of transcription contain such ambiguities. As Mary Bucholtz has noted, the translation of speech onto the printed page involves subjective decisions made by the transcriber at almost every turn: ‘All transcripts take sides, enabling certain interpretations, advancing particular interests, favoring specific speakers, and so on... Embedded in the details of transcription are indications of purpose, audience, and the position of the transcriber toward the text’ (Bucholtz 2000, 1440). These interpretive factors persist regardless of the degree of ‘objectivity’ or fidelity which the transcribed text aspires to in documenting the highly ideolectical nature of speech acts. Indeed, the very act of ‘faithfully’ representing nonstandard speech can itself have interpretive consequences that are not innocent of political considerations. And nowhere are the interpretive choices that underwrite the physical representation of speech more apparent than in decisions regarding how to represent non-standard speech. Bucholtz’s own analysis of interpretive bias centres on the representation of non-standard English in naturalized versus denaturalized transcription (Bucholtz 2000, 1461-3). In the latter, the transcript attempts to use typographic or phonetic markers to represent the orthography of speech; it attempts to render on the printed page the speaker’s exact oral discourse, including all ‘deviations’ from formal SE

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2 I use the terms *slave* and *creole* dialect interchangeably and in a broad sense. Technically, several of the dialect speakers I examine in these works are not ‘creole’ in the strict sense of being West Indian-born (e.g., some are West African), while a few would not be considered ‘slaves’ since they have arrived in England after the Mansfield ruling of 1771 (which legally emancipated any slave brought to English shores). However, none of these distinctions impact the dialect speech in question, which is represented on the printed page more or less uniformly.
(e.g., idiosyncratic, cultural, or ethnic tendencies). In contrast to such denaturalized transcripts, the naturalized transcript uniformly standardizes all speech, converting oral discourse into print through formal *literacization*—‘the privileging of written over oral discourse features’ (Bucholtz 2000, 1461). What a naturalized (or literacized) transcript gains in legibility and uniformity, it loses in precision and specificity. What a denaturalized (or oral) transcript gains in precision, it loses in the very self-consciousness of its status as oral discourse, including the risk that the transcript style may encourage readers to filter the content of the speech through the prejudices attending non-standard English (Bucholtz 2000, 1453).

These interpretive issues are of critical importance to the representation of speech in all three of the 1831 slave narratives: each of them features a blend of naturalized and denaturalized components in its depiction of slaves. On the one hand, the narrations provided by Prince, Asa-Asa, and Warner are all represented in standard English. The Prince and Warner texts extend this principle to the direct discourse between the narrator and other black or creole persons. At key moments, this SE even rises to a highly elaborate and rhetorical—almost *poetical*—eloquence. This mode is evidenced, for instance, by the emotionally charged speeches that Prince and her mother deliver as they are sold to separate buyers at the slave auction (Salih 2001, 10-13). When the narrators turn these densely rhetorical modes to an ‘abolitionist’ denunciation of colonial slaveholding practices (as they do in all three), the editors of these texts insert footnotes and other paratextual interjections which assure the reader that the speeches are presented *exactly* in the narrators’ own words—as if anticipating readers’ disbelief in the autonomous rhetorical and political capacities of former slaves (e.g., Salih 2001, 37, 66; Strickland 1831, 43).

On the other hand, all three of the texts also contrast the standard English of their narrators with the creole dialect of other slaves. In the Prince text, this occurs most memorably in the direct discourse of a ‘French black’ named Hetty, which Prince overhears when Hetty is being violently flogged (Salih 2001, 13; this anecdote is discussed further in §4). In the Warner text, creole dialect is only encountered in the several antislavery testimonials appended to the narrative. For instance, in the ‘Testimony of the Rev. Joseph Orton on Colonial Slavery’, Trew relates planter abuses by directly citing his interviews with slaves: ‘No, massa, me done up; me ask for salt, me ask for salt... me have nothing but what piccaninny bring to me’ (Strickland 1831, 78). In the narrative of Asa-Asa, the status of creole dialect is even more perplexing. In fact, it is only encountered in Asa-Asa’s own speech, cited directly in the preface preceding his narrative: ‘Me no father, no mother now, me stay with you... Me think,—me think— ... Me think what a good thing I came to England! Here, I know what God is, and read my Bible; in my cou...[country] they have no God, no Bible’ (Salih 2001, 33). In terms of transcription, these paratexts are further complicated by the fact that they appear to be transcriptions of first-person accounts re-rendered into the third-person, with direct first-person citations of slave speech along the way. The context of these interviews is given on Strickland 1831, 70, but do not reveal if Strickland played any role in their transcription. For Strickland’s involvement with the Anti-Slavery Society generally, see Whitlock 2000.
The ascription of slave dialect to Asa-Asa in the preface is especially curious given the equivocal transparency claims in his narrative’s preface. According to the editor, emendations practices are used on the majority of the his actual narrative except in the final paragraph, which is given in inverted commas and is said to be his words verbatim. Curiously, this final paragraph is characterized by an even greater mastery of standard English. For instance, in the sentence preceding this final paragraph, Asa-Asa substitutes adjective for adverb to describe how a Frenchman ‘cut my head very bad one time’, yet in the final paragraph he uses the proper adverbial form to describe ‘how cruelly we are used’ (Salih 2001, 69-70; my emphasis).

2.2: Slave dialect in the fictional texts

The general pattern of contrasting speakers of SE with those of CD is even more pronounced in the fictional writings of Moodie, which are worth looking at in relation to her transcriptional practices for three important reasons. First, the typographic representation of CD is nearly identical across the genres. In fact, a creole eye dialect recurs throughout Moodie’s writings both prior to and following her involvement with the 1831 slave narratives. CD features heavily in two early pedagogical texts by Moodie: the short narrative ‘The Vanquished Lion’ (1828) and the children’s novella Hugh Latimer (1831). These make extensive use of CD through the voices of the South African slave Charka and the African child-servant Pedro respectively. Richard Redpath (1843), a lengthy romance novella set entirely in Jamaica, also makes extensive of CD through a number of free black and slave speakers. In addition to these three texts (discussed further in §4), the fictionalized autobiographies Trifles from the Burthen of Life (1851) and Flora Lyndsay (1853) incorporate CD through the speech of the minor slave characters Caesar and Hector respectively. Finally, the short comical tale ‘Washing the Black-A-Moor White’ (1871) features the speech of a ‘negro lad’ from near the Guinea coast (Thurston 1991, 254).4

The second reason is the already blurred distinction between these two bodies of writing. As literary scholars like John Thurston and Gillian Whitlock have noted, the majority of Moodie’s fictional works have strongly autobiographical and historical elements and vice versa (Thurston 1991, 23, 37-8, 97; Whitlock 2000, 56-65). In fact, both Trifles and Lyndsay are virtual autobiographies. Moreover, Moodie’s personal correspondences reveal that the framing narrative of Redpath is based on historical incidents, while truth claims also feature prominently in ‘Black-A-Moor’ with its use of British geographical markers and its anecdotal set-up.

The third and most important reason for placing these stories in relation to the slave narratives are the shared thematic concerns which run across Moodie’s transcriptional and fictional texts. These are most noticeably illustrated by placing the Prince narrative alongside Redpath. As Thurston has pointed out, the dramatic scenes of

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4 ‘The Vanquished Lion’ (reprinted in Thurston 1991, 31-42); Hugh Latimer (Strickland 1828); Richard Redpath (Moodie 1843); Trifles from the Burthen of Life (Thurston 1991, 160-240); Flora Lyndsay (Moodie 1853); ‘Washing the Black-A-Moor White’ (Thurston 1991, 253-6).
the slave market in *Mary Prince* are imported into the main plot of *Redpath* with little alteration when the eponymous British hero shipwrecks in Jamaica and poses as an auctioned slave in order to generate capital on his own sale (Thurston 1991, 97). Yet the scenes of the slave market also reappear in *Redpath’s* secondary subplot, which features the sentimental narrative of a free creole woman named Marcella de Frueba. Having been forced into the ‘slavery’ of an undesirable marriage with a licentious planter by her greedy and tyrannical family, her overwrought monologues seamlessly invoke the recollections of Prince at the slave auction which Moodie had transcribed some ten years earlier (Moodie 1843, 445-6). These two subplots of slavery in *Redpath*—the one concerned with actual human chattel and the other with sentimental issues of domestic and sexual tyranny (*à la* Richardson’s *Clarissa*)—literally bifurcate the dominant thematic elements of Prince’s narrative. Conversely, such seamless fictional redeployments of the Prince text signal the ways in which the earlier slave narrative was already very much a ‘crafted’ affair.

Placing these two texts into conversation also reveals the very self-conscious status of slave dialect and its transcription in Moodie’s writings. In *Redpath*, the bulk (though not all) of dialect speech is delivered by the white hero while disguised as a slave named Sambo. As Michelle Gadpaille has insightfully noted, Moodie, whether conscious or not, offers in *Redpath* an allegorical admission of having voiced black speech: ‘Moodie’s act of giving voice to the black body... in essence is what Moodie represents in the Redpath/Sambo masquerade... By having her character take on the appearance, voice and role of the slave, Moodie embodies the unspeakable earlier event in a more acceptable form: blackface’ (Gadpaille 2009, 29). Gadpaille reads the incident in *Redpath* as evidence that Moodie at least partially ventriloquized the Prince and Warner texts. Yet even if the extent of the Moodie’s involvement in the narratives could be determined, the question of why the transcription process took the *particular* shape that it did still warrants investigation. Utilizing a trans-generic framework, my aim is to illustrate a complex set of critical principles operative in the form of the standard-dialect contrast—a formal mode capable of sustaining transcription no less than imaginative composition across Moodie’s corpus of writings.

3: Moodie and Slave Speech: A trans-generic framework

In placing the slave narratives in relation to Moodie’s fictional tales, my goal is not to call into question the historical basis of the slave narratives any more than I wish to imply that her fictional stories are straightforward documents of history. My aim is instead to uncover a representational structure common to both—principles of interpretation that inform the standard English vs. creole dialect contrast. To that end, I draw on Andrew Elfenbein’s insightful analysis of the interpretive considerations surrounding the slave’s ‘bad English’ in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century

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5 The dynamic interrelations between historical socio-linguistics and the ‘fictio-linguistic’ representation of dialect in Victorian novels have been examined by Ferguson 1998.
British writing. Situating Moodie’s early writings within this cultural moment, I examine how her use of slave dialect evinces a very particular critical and aesthetic engagement with ideas of slavery and representation. Yoking politics and aesthetics inextricably together, this critical frame of reference characterizes much of her early fictional and pedagogical writing and reveals a logic behind Moodie’s use of the SE-CD contrast that is no less operative in the slave narratives.

3.1: Modernity against the non-standard

By the time Moodie began writing professionally in the 1820s, representations of creole speech had already stabilized into a recognizable literary dialect, one among many within the ‘overwhelming’ amount of ‘nonstandard pronunciation in eighteenth-century and Romantic era literature’ (Elfenbein 2009, 78). Indeed, the ‘bad English’ of slaves—by its very contrast with standard English—sharply sets into relief the socio-historical processes of linguistic transformation which took place in eighteenth-century Britain. Beginning in the second half of the century with influential texts by Robert Lowth on grammar, Samuel Johnson on lexicography, and Thomas Sheridan on pronunciation, the prescriptive gatekeepers and reformers of the English language ensured that the era’s mania for conduct and politesse transformed every aspect of the English language into a site of a ‘correct’ discipline against ‘incorrect’ corruptions (Finegan 1998, 536-88). As Elfenbein has noted, the purification of English was ‘a massive, decentralized goal on the part of educators, lexicographers, politicians, orthoepists, clergymen, actors, and grammarians’ (2009, 74). Moreover, the ideological shifts which they effected had material consequences at the level of writing. As historical socio-linguists have demonstrated, the period bore witness to a shift from ‘oral’ to ‘literate’ styles in prose genres, whereby ‘[o]ral dimensions [were] still found in early eighteenth-century writings, but throughout that century, prose genres consistently evolved towards a more literate style in the formal/informal stylistic continuum, one which was less involved, more abstract, more elaborated and carefully planned’ (Yáñez-Bouza 2006, §4.2-5).

Moreover, shifts towards standardization at one register of language helped bolster shifts occurring at other registers, and this is especially true of the relationship between print and orthography: ‘Print now projected a powerful fantasy: standardized graphemes stood for a pre-existing aural universe of uniform phonemes.’ As such, ‘dialect became a powerful marker of otherness, one easily seized upon for purposes of national or imperial self-assertion’ (Elfenbein 2009, 76). Playwrights—a central vehicle for the dissemination of ‘good’ literacized pronunciation through print—‘typically created an in-group of characters who used correct English and an out-group who did not’ (Elfenbein 2009, 76). As Moira Ferguson blankly puts it, ‘the contrast between speech in “formal” English and slaves’ “scant” English... emphasizes the “stupidity” of slaves’ (Ferguson 1992, 103).

The propagandistic functions of these discursive modes were rooted in the continual attempt to manufacture those differences which the texts merely claimed to describe, projecting an ‘implied audience’ whose in-group mastery of standard English
allowed them to recognize its ‘deformations’ as such (Elfenbein 2009, 77). Moodie’s traffic in this form of dialect usage has been documented in the numerous studies of her early Canadian writings. For instance, although Moodie’s typographic renderings of the Scotch dialect undeniably illustrate a ‘good ear’ (Dollinger 2010, 205), her practice of making ‘only those characters separate from her in race or class speak dialect points to mockery as part of her intention in using it. The Irishmen, Indians, Yankees, and servants of *Roughing It* speak dialect, but English gentlemen... speak in cadences indistinguishable from hers’ (Thurston 1996, 146). Yet arguably the only one of Moodie’s texts that *unambiguously* extends this representational practice to illustrate the ‘stupidity of slaves’ is ‘Washing the Black-A-Moor White’ (1871). Published well after the need for abolitionist agitation in the British colonies and the antebellum U.S., this brief narrative relates the tale of a young black slave in the colonies whose diatribes against his master’s ethnographic instruments reinforce his status as ‘Quashee’ other to scientific modernity. By 1871, Moodie could no doubt afford to join her peers south of the border in engaging in such ‘quaintly’ white supremacist mockery of blacks.

Conversely, the earlier nineteenth-century texts evidence profoundly different discursive agendas. In these texts, the sentimental representation of slaves is part and parcel with the broader abolitionist aim of fostering sympathetic concerns for the plight of blacks in the U.S. and the British colonies. As one American abolitionist editor blankly stated, ‘argument provokes argument, reason is met by sophistry. But narratives of slaves go right to the hearts of men’ (quoted in Bibb & Matlack 1850, 207). These discursive aims manifested in writing a counter stream of sympathetic representations of slave dialect. As Elfenbein notes, ‘[t]he ability to create sympathy across linguistic difference was a critical moment in the history of British toleration, and possibly even a precondition for major shifts that would lead to the abolition of the slave trade’ (Elfenbein 2009, 83). Yet rather than examine how Moodie’s sentimental pedagogy was determined by her abolitionist sentiments, I want instead to emphasize how both were the result of a prior aesthetic and political engagement with modernity—an engagement which particularly resonates with the Romantic redeployment of bad English described by Elfenbein.

3.2: The non-standard against modernity

Of course, the very ‘backwardness’ in which the creole dialect was perceived *vis-à-vis* modern standard English imbued slaves with an inherent moral potential. As Elfenbein points out, non-standard dialects often functioned as the linguistic other to the rule-bound, authoritative and contrived nature of formal English. As such, the slave’s ‘broken’ English constellated among other sentimental valorizations of the premodern

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6 Thurston also implicitly connects this line of analysis to Moodie’s representations of the ‘dialect of blacks’, see Thurston 1996, 223n21.

7 On the figure of the West Indian ‘Quashee’—see Holt 1992, 146.

8 Such Reconstruction-era racist ‘turns’ in American culture have been examined in numerous studies (e.g., Williams 2001, 96-135).
which characterize Romantic aesthetics generally: ‘[a]rchaic English could be seen as
reviving the “wild and disorderly” language of true poets, reaching back to a more
genuine, though less polished, expression’ (Elfenbein 2009, 90). Thus, the slave dialect
could offer a particularly salient locus to

...draw attention to printed English as signs governed by a self-contained set of
rules; the more visible language became as a system, the less adequate it
potentially seemed as a vehicle for expressing thoughts and emotions not part of
such a system. The sympathetic representation of dialect projected a pure thought
and intention prior to language that a reader could recover from its imperfect
realization in print. (2009, 90)

In other words, such linguistic modes were marshaled in the Romantic critique of the
excesses and corruptions of modernity.⁹

Such Romantic conceptions of history held a central place in Moodie’s early
sentimental and critical works. These writings illustrate Moodie’s disparagement of ‘all
the cant about ‘enlightened views,’ and of the ‘taste that despises the marvelous’
(Thurston 1996, 42). Moreover, they demonstrate her preference for ‘romantic incidents’
that ‘in a more settled state of society would be unnatural’ since ‘all youthful minds
worth anything... breathe in the sunny atmosphere of romance’. Likewise, her literary
criticism in the Athenaeum journal ‘makes clear her distaste for modern times and her
belief that in historical settings romance seems natural’ (Thurston 1996, 43).

Ultimately, Moodie’s engagement with the romance of history was intimately
bound up with the themes of captivity and emancipation that were also a constant
leitmotif throughout her early writing. In fact, the very pedagogical utility of historical
representation lay in its power to reignite the longings for freedom that have grown
dormant and complacent in modern times. Looking backwards, writes Moodie in an
early critical review, helps readers to experience ‘the intense yearnings after freedom of
the serf, who knew his rights but who unhappily could not maintain, nay, even assert
them’—yearnings which she herself attempted to recreate through the characteristic
‘concer[n] with freedom in historical settings’ underwriting her early prose and verse
(Thurston 1996, 45). For example, in her poem ‘Francis I. In Captivity,’ Moodie’s Francis
‘rails against those who “talk of freedom! - who have never known / But half the value
of the good they prize” because they have never had “their hopes o’erthrown” and “All
liberty, save that of thought, denied”’ (Thurston 1996, 42). Indeed, this preoccupation
with the regenerative benefits of a cultural remembrance of slavery crested with her
didactic poem ‘The Captive Squirrel’s Petition’ (1830). Through Moodie’s characteristic
fusion of ‘the childhood of European civilization and personal childhood’ (1996, 42), this
pastoral poem details the encounter between Janet, a young daughter of a woodman,
and a squirrel held ‘captive’ as a caged pet. As Janet slumbers beside the pet squirrel, it

⁹ For a general overview of the romantic critique of modernity, see Lowy & Sayre 2001, 29-42.
begins to lament the loss of its former freedoms in the countryside and exhorts her to set it free. In the final stanza of its petition, the squirrel declares that

“...If freedom to your soul is dear, have pity then
on me,
Unbar this narrow cage, and set your hapless
prisoner free!”

That melancholy, plaintive wail
The maiden's slumbers broke,
And with a sudden start and cry
The little Janet woke. (Strickland 1830, 14)

Of course, the lesson of the squirrel’s lament takes hold in her mind and, moved by its heart-felt plea, she liberates the beloved pet.

Although the squirrel’s captive petition is offered through formal, even poetically ‘pure’, English in the lyrical stanzas of the ballad, the dialogic structure of the poem perfectly captures Moodie’s critical engagement with slavery. The enchantment offered by the talking squirrel undoubtedly stands at odds with the modern assumptions of even the young Janet—indeed, a ‘cry of wonder broke/ From her red lips’ at the commencement of its speech (Strickland 1830, 11)—yet this exposure to the speech of an enslaved other is necessary to cultivate didactic sentiments in the present. Sympathy is felt most strongly when overcoming the obstacles of alienation and otherness—when captives speak to us across difference and plead for our pity. Hearing the captive speak, feeling the power of its message, and learning the normative response of pity across difference—this dialogic interaction with alterity virtually defines Moodie’s use of the SE-CD contrast. Ultimately, the greatest source of this productive difference is located in the chasm between free and slave. Only when the latter teach the former to receive the captive petition that inheres within slave dialect will a mutual understanding occur—an understanding that is modeled by the characters and offered to the readers of these narratives. The final section traces out this complex structure of response in four of Moodie’s texts.

4: The SE-CD contrast: case studies

4.1: ‘The Vanquished Lion’ (1828) and Hugh Latimer (1828)

The pedagogical and sentimental lessons of slavery clearly structure the use of slave dialect in two of Moodie’s early fictional works. Written prior to the transcription of the Prince and Warner texts, they nevertheless cement a representational technique that Moodie would recourse to in the slave narratives. In ‘The Vanquished Lion’, the lessons of slavery are highly generalized and the SE-CD contrast is used indirectly to convey a sentimental moral. The short story describes the financial misfortunes of the
Fenwicks, an English family who must subsequently emigrate to the Cape of Good Hope as colonial settlers. Once in Africa, the story quickly focuses on the abolitionist coming-to-consciousness of the young Fenwick boy, Lewis. Initially, ‘the prejudices of colour operate[d] very forcibly upon [Lewis’s] mind against the natives of country’ and his uncle’s slave Charka ‘in particular seemed greatly to excite his aversion’ (Thurston 1991, 36). His mother, in turn, chides him for his fear of difference and the unfamiliar:

...it grieves me to see such a cruel trait in your character. Why should you regard with aversion a fellow-creature... merely because his skin is of a different hue. To look upon Charka with such abhorrence, is to reproach your Maker. Your fair face and light hair may excite feelings of a similar nature in the breast of the African. To be black is no disgrace—to be fair is no merit of yours. (Thurston 1991, 37)

Instead, she informs him that the ‘consideration that Charka is a slave should produce in your bosom feelings of compassion and tenderness, instead of hatred and disgust’—prompting Lewis to commence his own redemptive education: “Mamma,” said Lewis, thoughtfully... what is a slave?” (Thurston 1991, 37).

Despite the antislavery sentiment his mother attempts to instill in Lewis, it is only through a dialogic interaction with the brave and faithful Charka that the child learns the true meaning of slavery. Having saved Lewis from a python, Charka petitions his ‘Dear young massa’ to that ‘think no ill of black man—look no dark upon him. Black man have a large heart—black man love all that treat him well’ (Thurston 1991, 39). Like the petition of the captive squirrel that is heard and felt deeply, the slave dialect impels moral reflections which Lewis can only realize by overcoming Charka’s differences. In fact, such a realization is precisely evidenced by Lewis’s subsequent ability to ‘universalize’ the emancipatory potential of dialectical exposure through his own speech: When his slaveholding uncle, Mr. Clayton, allows Lewis to reward Charka in any manner of his choosing, Lewis decides that

“I would make him free...”
“And why would you do this, Lewis?”
“Because, sir, I feel that it is impossible for any man to be happy whilst he remains a slave!”

Mr. Clayton was struck to the heart. He remained silent for a few minutes, then turning to Lewis, he said, “You shall have your wish; from this hour your deliverer is free! And not Charka—I will emancipate every slave on my location, for that word of yours.” (Thurston 1991, 40; my italics)

By instructing Lewis to master the affective language of emancipation, Charka has been his deliverer in more ways than one: Lewis’s ‘word’ now represents the sentimental reformation of standard English that can result from an engagement with slave dialect.

The reform of standard English speakers also features prominently in the children’s novella Hugh Latimer, which is even more explicit in its pedagogical use of the
SE-CD contrast. In this story, the middle-class hero, Hugh Latimer, and his aristocratic best friend, Montrose, come upon a group of white school-boys who are harassing a ‘black youth’ from Africa named Pedro (or ‘Blackey’ as he is also sometimes called). While the heroes look on, the other children evince a strong aversion to Pedro as they ‘unfeelingly remarked on the dingy colour of his skin, and asked him a thousand trifling, questions’ (Strickland 1828, 37). Crucially, the contrast between standard English and dialect is clearly established in this scene: one of the bullies ‘foolishly said, that “He ought to go to school, to learn grammar” another, “That a magpie could speak better English” … and they knocked his basket down’ (Strickland 1828, 37). In effect, the schoolchildren reveal the disturbing ideological underside of linguistic prescriptivism: Moodie establishes a clear metonymic link between the violence of the unfeeling schoolchildren and their inability to reckon Pedro’s pathetic pleas of “Who buy, who buy?—Little massa, buy cake of poor Blackey?” (Strickland 1828, 36). In contrast, Hugh and Montrose model opposing virtues by their ability to hear Pedro’s captive petition: ‘The black raised his large eyes, red and bloodshot with weeping, mournfully to Hugh’s face—“Alas! Alas! good massa, poor Blackey has no friend.”’ The tears rushed into the eyes of Montrose as the unfortunate negro again renewed his pathetic lamentations’ (Strickland 1828, 43). The reform is completed when the boys bring Pedro to Montrose’s uncle, who promptly purchases Pedro out of service to a violent master and employs him as his own domestic.

Critically, this scene also gestures to a broader pedagogical pattern within the narrative whereby slave dialect facilitates connections between readers of the printed page and listeners in the printed page. In effect, the scene of Hugh and Montrose fighting off the other schoolchildren in response to Pedro’s pleas that he has ‘no friend’ directly mirrors an earlier moment in the narrative when the affective bond between Hugh and Montrose is first forged. Hugh, who is initially isolated and bullied for being a shopkeeper’s son by the upper-class public schoolchildren, offers a similar plea to the sympathetic Montrose: “I have been in this school for nearly half a year, and you are the first that ever spoke kindly to me, or without insult.” “Then I will be your friend,” cried the impetuous Montrose, “I will fight for you; I will make them treat you with the respect that I am sure you deserve” (Strickland 1828, 33). In the opening pages of the novel, the reader is initially made to feel pity for the isolated Hugh; later, the feeling Montrose stands in the same relation to Hugh that the reader earlier did; and finally, Hugh joins both the reader and Montrose in pitying the friendless Pedro. In tracing Hugh’s trajectory from object to subject of sentiment, the reader is led through a process of identifying with the captive and disavowing the oppressor. This process primes the reader to hear creole dialect through an established normative response and is explicitly utilized as a pedagogical strategy in both the Prince text and the Redpath tale.

4.2: The History of Mary Prince (1831)

The slave narrative of Mary Prince crafts a web of readerly identifications and disavowals which are even more complex than those of the earlier pedagogical narratives; yet a similarly process of progressively hearing, feeling, and understanding
slavery also characterizes its use of slave dialect. I have been arguing that in the Moodie texts, the primary function of the SE-CD contrast is to interpellate the reader into an ingroup which can effectively master the slave’s romantic dialect. Yet Prince would seemingly contradict this process by offering the slave’s narrative in standard English, one that is ‘written by herself’ in order that the ‘good people in England’ might hear ‘from a slave what a slave felt and suffered’ (Salih 2001, 3; my italics). Yet this is precisely the point: situated somewhere in the interstices between ‘from a slave’ and ‘what a slave’, Prince is both subject and object of the narrative’s pedagogical functions. As a sentimental subject, she is responsible for the agential function of directing the reading public’s education; as a slave, she is equally tasked with being the essential object lesson as only a slave can be. The result, of course, is an ontological double-bind: Prince must alternate between the pedagogical roles of Lewis Fenwick and Charka, Hugh Latimer and Pedro, and both at the same time.

One way in which the text mitigates this tension is by utilizing the SE-CD contrast in ways that recall the techniques of the earlier texts. Where the dialectic distinction was used to mark Hugh Latimer’s development as an object of pity to a pitying subject, the inverse process is used to create a functional blending of the two in Prince. Here, Prince begins the narrative as the normative sentimental subject with which the reader is encouraged to identify. Her own feelings and sufferings are often rendered only through her sympathetic connections with others: first her benevolent mistress, then her mother, and then, of course, the abused slave Hetty. As in the earlier stories, the narrative’s inaugural use of the creole dialect marks its most explicitly didactic encounter with slavery:

...I heard a noise in my mistresses’ room; and she presently called out to inquire if some work was finished that she had ordered Hetty to do. ’No, Ma’am, not yet,’ was Hetty’s answer from below... I heard immediately after, the cracking of the throng, and the house rang to the shrieks of poor Hetty, who kept crying out, “Oh, Massa! Massa! me dead. Massa! have mercy upon me—I don’t kill me outright.’ — This was a sad beginning for me’ (Salih 2001, 14; my italics).

This ‘beginning’, it turns out, marks the moment when Prince, like Fenwick, learns ‘what is a slave’ — and that it is also herself. Immediately after this passage, Prince reveals that:

The next morning my mistress set about instructing me in my tasks. She taught me to do all sorts of household work; to wash and bake, pick cotton and wool, and wash floors, and cook. And she taught me (how can I ever forget it!) more things than these; she caused me to know the exact difference between the smart of the rope, the cart-whip, and cow-skin, when applied to my naked by her own cruel hand. (Salih 2001, 14; my italics)

By priming the reader’s response to the dialectically marked Hetty before immediately
switching places with her, Prince maintains her hybrid status as both addressee and deliverer of the captive petition. In doing so, the text maintains Prince’s ‘in group’ function of offering a readerly vantage point from which to disavow the planter’s obduracy and inability to hear ‘poor Hetty’, even as Prince herself subsequently descends into that pitiable state.

4.3. Richard Redpath (1843)

As outlined in §2, there are several different creole voices in the Jamaican setting of Moodie’s novella Richard Redpath, yet the most substantial of these belongs to the English hero while in blackface disguise as the slave Sambo. Within the narrative, the SE-CD contrast also illustrates the same sentimental pedagogy of the earlier texts and is used to resolve one of the text’s underlying romantic tensions: to wit, the virtuous hero Richard Redpath, who everywhere demonstrates a properly abolitionist sympathy for the slave, falls for Betsy Baynes, the daughter of a rich Jamaican plantocrat. As a result, the initial characterization of Baynes remains rather awkward, attempting to balance her inherent virtue in being worthy of Redpath’s regard against the shocking moral improprieties of slaveholding.

This tension ultimately sets up the all-important moral conversion of Baynes by Sambo’s captive petition—the sentimental speech of the slave in which the virtuous and industrious Redpath is fluent. Using his slave dialect, Redpath/Sambo teaches the unthinking Baynes that it is precisely through slaves’ speech that one can reckon their humanity. Initially, the unfeeling young woman sees little reason to distinguish between her slave and her monkey, Tippoo:

“Ah, Tippoo! you beast! you have broken my best carnations!” cried the little black-eyed damsel, striking a pet monkey... “I wish you were dead! I do.”

“Ah, missa! You cry to make him pet alive again berry soon. I wish I were Tippoo!”

“Wish you were a monkey, Sambo! Why that would be worse than being a nigger. The monkey cannot speak, and you can.”

“Is dat de only difference,” said Richard, hardly able to suppress a laugh, “between de black man and de monkey? Well, den, missa, me give de monkey de preference. He hab no voice to speak his grief—de black man hab voice, but dare not utter de big thought in his sad heart.” (Moodie 1843, 487; my italics)

Having drawn attention to the dialectical language as the vehicle through which slaves impart their lessons, Richard/Sambo proceeds to proclaim his captive petition:

“Why do you sigh, Sambo—are you unhappy?”

“Ah, yes, missa! Sambo berry much unhappy. When me sigh, den my heart speak—bounce! bounce!—no put him to silence. Me hold my tongue, but me no hold my heart—Sambo’s heart berry large.” (Moodie 1843, 487)
In fact, Sambo’s ‘captivity’ here is a double entendre. As Sambo, it refers to his chattel status, but as Redpath, it refers to his enamoured condition. Yet for Baynes to be worthy of the latter, the narrative must train her to hear the former. Immediately following this exchange, her father whips Redpath/Sambo for a minor offense. Consequently, Betsy Baynes finds herself sympathetic to the slave for the first time in her life:

Mr. Baynes had... vented his spleen upon Sambo, without sparing either his person or his feelings. It was the first licking Master Richard had ever received, and he did not greatly relish the unexpected taste of the cow-skin. His back smarted—the planter stormed—Miss Betsy cried... Miss Betsy felt for Sambo’s back as if it had been her own (Moodie 1843, 488, my italics)

Of course, by the novella’s end, ‘the hitherto spoilt and wayward child’ (Moodie 1843, 562) develops into a woman who is worthy of the unmasked Redpath’s love. Given that her dialogue with Sambo and her subsequent response to his whippings offer the only actual evidence of this transformation, slave dialect once again maintains its status as the central vehicle of Moodie’s pedagogical method.

5. Conclusion

Indeed, the parallels between the character of Richard Redpath in the novella and the authorial persona of Susanna Strickland Moodie in the slave narratives are patent. Redpath ventriloquizes black speech; educates others how to hear slave dialect, and marshals sentiment to counter black prejudice. Redpath is, by his own admission, successful in ‘wash[ing] the black-a-moor white’ (Moodie 1843, 559), much as Moodie was in the transformations of Prince and Warner into speakers of standard English.

Yet in order to fully appreciate this parallel, we must attend to the ways in which the slave narratives also insist upon a concurrent parallel between Moodie and her own fictional characters: the ‘transcriber-function’ that emerges in these documents is framed as no less receptive to the sentimental effects of the language of slaves. As she writes in the preface to the Warner narrative, the process of transcribing these accounts led to her own moral conversion from someone complacent about issues concerning colonial slavery to committed abolitionist:

The entire change in my own ideas, in regard to slavery, was chiefly effected by the frequent opportunities which Providence recently and unexpectedly threw in my way of conversing with several negroes, both male and female, who had been British colonial slaves, and who had borne in their own persons the marks of the brand and the whip, and had drank the bitter cup to its dregs. To their simple and affecting narratives I could not listen unmoved. The voice of truth and nature prevailed over my former prejudices. I beheld slavery unfolded in all its revolting details... (Strickland 1831, 10; my italics)
Not only does Warner’s captive petition operate through language—Moodie ‘converses’ and ‘listen[s] moved’ to ‘the voice of truth’—such a dialogic encounter explicitly structures Moodie’s role in the narrative. In effect, the reformist potential of the final text becomes virtually self-identical with Moodie’s own redemptive encounter with slavery:

Thinking that the same means which had operated so effectually upon my own mind might produce a favourable result in other persons who had been accustomed to view the case in the same careless and prejudiced manner, it occurred to me that I might publish, with some small advantage to the cause the following little history (Strickland 1831, 10-11)

In fact, the staging of this redemptive encounter between modern English sensibilities and the slave was a virtual constant throughout much Moodie’s critical and literary career. Despite Moodie’s standardization of English speech in transcribing the slave narratives of Prince and Warner, an analysis of these slave narratives within her broader corpus of writing gestures to the central role played by slave dialect as a means of ‘operating so effectually’ upon the transatlantic reading public.
References

Primary


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Secondary


