

The Narrative of Nancy Prince: Historical Facts—Artistic Fiction

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While researching *Painting the Inhabited Landscape: Fitz H. Lane and the Global Reach of Antebellum America* (Penn State Press 2023), which tells the story of Fitz Henry Lane, who grew up poor in antebellum Gloucester, Massachusetts--successively shoemaker, lithographer, painter--I read decades of the local newspapers and came across this notice concerning one of his contemporaries:

-“Narrative of Mrs. Prince.—This is the title of an interesting narrative of Mrs. Nancy Prince, a colored lady, who during her life has passed many years in Russia, and in Jamaica. Mrs. Prince resided in this town during her younger years, and is the daughter of Mrs. Jane Vose, who was well known here. Mrs. V. was the daughter of Tobias Womton [sic], better known as ‘Bacchas;’ Mrs. Prince is now in town disposing of copies of her work, which gives a minute description of the principle incidents which transpired during her stay in Russia and Jamaica, and we commend her to the patronage of our citizens.” *Gloucester Telegraph Saturday*, July 20, 1850, vol. 14, no. 58.

Intrigued, I immediately located and read Nancy Prince’s autobiography, deciding there and then that here was my next book project and, just as important, that having a group of students engage with me in an initial foray into research would be a fine opportunity to clarify for them the steps in that process and show them what a pleasure it is to do real research, pressing the boundaries of

knowledge. Prince's account of her life would provide the opportunity to vividly engage students with the antebellum period in the U. S., and introduce them to major events in Russia and the Caribbean, while also, with a screenplay, spurring their creativity and imagination. I was offered the opportunity to teach an Honors Seminar for the American Studies Program in the Spring of 2022 and seized it.

This is the Course Description the students read:

This seminar focuses on the autobiography published in 1850 by an African-American woman who grew up in New England, Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince (with 1853 and 1856 later editions). Born poor but free and resourceful, she spent a decade at the Tsar's court in Russia observing the urban populace, the military, and the imperial family. She also traveled to the Caribbean, eluded those who sought to enslave her, and, safe back in Boston, left us an account of her unique adventures. The first half of the semester we will do intensive research to investigate her narrative, ascertain the backstory to her sometimes enigmatic observations, and create an annotated version of her text. During the second half of the term the class will create a screenplay based on her life. In other words, this is both a research seminar giving students an opportunity to learn about the period 1800-1860 in New England, the Caribbean, and Russia in some depth, and an opportunity to turn the facts of a life into art.

I sought to give students practice in reading a primary text carefully, slowly, attentively, analytically, and interrogatively. Secondly, I designed the course to give students practice in researching cultural and social history concerning the period 1800-1865 in the U. S., Russia, and Jamaica, and writing up their research findings with appropriate scholarly documentation. And most important, I hoped to give students an opportunity to work individually and in teams to imagine and write the life of Nancy Prince as a series of scenes, fictionalized as a film script.

During the first weeks of the course we read and analyzed Nancy Prince's *Narrative*, made a timeline of her life and a list of the people she mentions as helping or hindering her. Next, in preparation for the second half of the course when the people named in Prince's text would become fictional versions of themselves, each student sketched out two of the characters we had met in the *Narrative*, imagining what they looked like, how old they were, what their social position appeared to be, what motivated them, and how those factors were visible in their interactions with our protagonist. It helped that Prince was very clear about naming names—ordinary people who had treated her badly and people

who had been helpful to her are immortalized in her text. The students' 'treatments' brought these figures to life with a carefully thought-out set of values, prejudices, and foibles in clear view.

At the same time the students selected and worked on their individual research topics—the research essays were due week eight. So, by mid-semester each student had become the class expert on two of our characters and, more crucial, on a subject that was fundamental to understanding the memoir and that would become instrumental in creating the film script.

In the middle weeks of the semester, the students watched and analyzed a film of their choice—a film concerning a real historical event with researchable individual figures given fictional treatment. They were directed to think about the film within the terms explained in Blake Snyder's *Save the Cat: The Last Book on Screenwriting That You'll Ever Need* (2005), a primer about writing a screenplay that they read with care in week nine. Snyder describes the sequence of incidents that compose a successful film script: introductory devices, elements that develop the plot, timing of precarious incidents, satisfactory conclusions, etc. He describes the importance of carefully plotting the arc of incidents, character development, near catastrophes for the protagonist, etc. on The Board. So, over the next four weeks we worked on the whiteboards that covered the walls in the classroom, plotting the film together. At the conclusion of each class we photographed The Board and sent the image(s) around to the class so that each class session we could build on the aspects of our plotting that the class decided were successful. Students were also encouraged to critique Snyder's system for understanding and constructing a successful screenplay as there are key elements that he seems to overlook, discount, or ignore. In other words, we were (re)constructing theory at the same time we were engaged in practice.

Each student was assigned to write a series of scenes that drew on that student's knowledge, an expertise developed in doing their research essay. For instance, in order to draft the scenes in which Prince as a teenager forcefully extracted her older sister from a crowded Boston brothel, we turned to the student who researched this question:

Houses of prostitution in Boston in 1810-20 period. Where located? Recruitment of girls? How organized? Who profited? Who patronized? Legal status? Prosecutions? Any images?

And to better understand her decision to marry an older man who was employed as a footman at the Tsar's court in St. Petersburg, and to better under-

stand the special “Arap” cohort to which he belonged, we turned to the students who had researched these questions:

The role of footmen in aristocratic and royal households in Europe in general and Russia in particular; the role of Black footmen ditto including Venice. Livery? Duties? Relationship to Blackamoor sculptural figures?;

and

Russian Tsars (Alexander and Nicholas), their families; the vexed issue of succession in the 1820s—the 1824-25 Decembrist Revolt. Floor plan of Winter Palace—how did the Tsar’s family and retinue occupy/use this space? What are the key doorways? Court life. Does any clothing survive? Historical images (maps, plans, elevations, paintings, drawings) of the Winter Palace in the 1820s-40s; photos from the 1840s-60s. Interior and exterior.

In order to understand and draft scenes about Prince’s expedition to Jamaica to assist the newly-freed formerly-enslaved adults and their children, and to begin to understand the political and religious background of emancipation in Jamaica and missionary zeal in New England, we looked to the students who had researched these issues:

The abolition of slavery in British dominions and (later) the U.S. (Emancipation Act): Newspapers, associations, politics: the founding, aims, actions of Wilberforce’s Anti-Slavery Society 1823 ff; Thomas Clarkson’s role in GB. And Wm Lloyd Garrison’s Anti-Slavery Society in Massachusetts. Goals and timeline of achievements. Bibliographies of publications by these associations. Nancy P’s letters to the Editor of the “Liberator”;

and

Jamaica c. 1840: demographics, economy, and politics; images and descriptions of the arrival of Black re-migrants from Africa (those taken in 1796 to Africa), from other Caribbean islands, and from the Southern US; maroons from the mountains; insurrection of June 1841. The Whitmarsh Expedition? The nature of missionary and Church work in Jamaica c. 1840. The nature of education for Black children in Jamaica c. 1840. St. Andrews Mountain? Mico Institute? Nancy P’s lecture/publication on “The West Indies” (1841);

and

Evangelical Christianity as experienced and lived by Nancy Prince.

Using their research and Prince's accounts of her actions, conversations, and dilemmas, the students drafted scenes including setting, action, and dialogue. Each of the scenes was assessed by the group as a whole and students were active in calling for amplification, truncation, deletion, changes, re-pondering of characters, dialogue, and whole scenes. In the last weeks of the semester we cobbled the scenes together into a 120-page filmscript (that was actually pretty good) and worked on it as a whole. In week sixteen (Reading and Recitation Week), we did a semi-staged reading of the script with students assigned to characters they had developed earlier. They were exuberant.

What made the seminar work was the students—they vigorously engaged with the individual research topics and the scene-writing, and with each other in good natured camaraderie both in person and when they read and commented on each other's essays and scripts. Particularly jocund were the sessions in which they created The Board for the film script with one student recording at the whiteboard and the class pressing for inclusions of lines, scenes, characters. They really did work as a team in which each individual member clearly brought a particular well-developed expertise and enthusiasm.

Both I and a discipline-based Research Librarian gave them an expanded research toolbox, inviting them to discover the online pathways to scholarly articles and to primary, especially archival, resources. Individually they grew as research-sleuths, moving well beyond the perfunctory Google searches that most Berkeley students understand to constitute "research." Brought together they particularly enjoyed sharing their finds, their ingenuity, and their creativity in imagining the past as a film enacted in the present tense.

This course may have new relevance in the universe of artificial intelligence. If I were to do it again I would finish the semester by showing the students the difference between what they had accomplished and what AI comes up with when tasked with writing a short 'treatment' of Nancy Prince's memoir as a potential screenplay: it is hilariously off base/erroneous in so many ways it would give them a good laugh and an excellent sense of their own empowerment as scholars in terms of their capacity to bring new archival knowledge into the story.

American Studies at Berkeley is organized on the axes of Space and Time (rather than the usual Texts and Contexts, linking English and History) so the students were versed in such helpful disciplinary perspectives as Architecture and City Planning, Cultural Geography, and Material Culture Studies. This course

might offer a useful template for others looking at provocative understudied first-person historical accounts of ‘ordinary’ lives and momentous events. Certainly, for me, it did achieve two major goals: to get students deeply interested in the antebellum period which is, I have found, not very familiar to them, and to incorporate students in the initial steps of starting my own scholarly project. Many years ago a student asked me about the process for finding subjects and writing books, “How do you do what you do?” and I found that question very hard to answer. This seminar is the best answer I have come up with.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Margaretta M. Lovell is a cultural historian working at the intersection of history, art history, and material culture studies. Currently the Jay D. McEvoy, Jr., Professor of American Art History at the University of California, Berkeley, she received her Ph.D. in American Studies at Yale University. She is the author of multiple books including *Art in a Season of Revolution: Painters, Artisans, and Patrons in Early America* (2005), *A Visitable Past: Views of Venice by American Artists 1860-1915* (1989), and most recently, *Painting the Inhabited Landscape: Fitz H. Lane and the Global Reach of Antebellum America* (2023). She is currently working on a biography of Nancy Prince.