TELL ME A BLACK STORY:
Controlled Narratives in Mary Prince and Lillian-Yvonne Bertram

Alex Tretbar

Abstract: In 1831, the editors of *The History of Mary Prince* erased "sensitive" aspects of the narrative that, in 2012, scholar Jessica L. Allen identified as important rhetorical functions of meaning-making. Similar erasures occur today, as evidenced by the AI-generated poetry of Lillian-Yvonne Bertram. This essay uses Allen's scholarship as a jumping-off point to trace a notion of controlled narratives through Prince and three books by Bertram, namely *Travesty Generator*, *Negative Money*, and the recently published chapbook *A Black Story May Contain Sensitive Content*. Special attention is paid to the ways in which AI (chiefly, ChatGPT-3) is incapable of replicating certain defining characteristics of Black poetic forms such as the duplex, and instead opts to erase them in as much the same manner as Mary Prince's editors.

Keywords: Mary Prince, Lillian-Yvonne Bertram, Gwendolyn Brooks, AI, large language model, OpenAI, ChatGPT, computational poetics

In her introduction to *The History of Mary Prince*, Sara Salih, who was editor of the 2004 Penguin edition, explains how Mary Prince's descriptions of "the cool and sinister sadism of her new master whose punishments seem to have been of a sexual nature" were "diplomatically glossed over" by her amanuensis and editors, in order to "spare the prudish sensibilities of potential readers who may have been too squeamish to face the truth about the sexual exploitation of black women by their white masters" (ix). Despite the abolition of slavery in the United States (and its rearticulation into the prison industrial complex and other structures of oppression), not much has changed since Prince's story was shaped and funneled through the mouthpiece of the Anti-Slavery Society in England, as evidenced by the title of poet Lillian-Yvonne Bertram's new AI-generated chapbook *A Black Story May Contain Sensitive Content*. In 1831, the white persons involved in controlling Prince's narrative deemed certain aspects of it to be so "sensitive" that they erased them altogether; and in 2022, when Bertram was repeatedly querying OpenAI's GPT-3 with "Tell me a Black story," the technology qualified nearly every one of its responses with a note explaining that the generated content was "'sensitive (or potentially in violation of its content policy)," though it did not explain what it meant by that qualification (Bertram 9).

And yet it seems, when perusing the landscape of modern publishing, that there is a premium placed on "sensitive" stories and poems, especially when they are made by

individuals from marginalized communities. A poem by a queer writer must be a poem about a *particular iteration of queerness*, and it must contain sensitive content. A short story by a refugee must be a *particular iteration of refugeehood*, and it must contain sensitive content. As Garth Greenwell has said, "many writers from marginalized communities feel this pressure, the responsibility to offer a story that supports a particular political vision. Give us the world as we want to see it, this pressure insists, not the world as you perceive it to be" (Greenwell). As a formerly incarcerated poet and writer, I, too, am sensitive to this tension. I have sometimes sensed, just below the surface of my interactions with other writers, readers, and editors, that the most interesting thing I could write about—the most *relevant* thing—is not only my incarceration, but a particular *iteration* of incarceration, and there is an unspoken expectation that such writing must contain sensitive content. To put it more crudely, it must be sensational.

Greenwell also notes that "[l]iterature is an extraordinary technology for the transmission of consciousness, which is what makes it worth devoting a life to" (Greenwell). But what happens to a poet's consciousness (or a *speaker*'s consciousness, in the case of Prince) when human and nonhuman actors embed themselves in the very process of that transmission? It is one thing for Anne Carson to translate Sappho, for we are informed upfront that we are reading a translation, and we are aware that translation is neither capable of nor does it necessarily aspire to a one-to-one conversion. But it is another thing when Thomas Pringle, Prince's employer and editor, tells us in the preface to Prince's narrative:

> 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 alienation farther than was requisite to exclude redundancies and gross grammatical errors, so as to render it clearly intelligible. (Prince 3)

In a 2012 article that was featured in *Callaloo*, Jessica L. Allen illustrates how so-called "redundancies" erased from Prince's narrative actually serve important rhetorical functions of meaning-making in Antiguan Creole, and I will be using Allen's scholarship as a jumping-off point to put Prince's narrative in conversation with the forces at play in Bertram's writing, specifically their books *Travesty Generator*, *Negative Money*, and *A Black Story May Contain Sensitive Content*. In particular, I will be focusing on the ways in which AI and large-language models (LLMs) narrow the aperture through which we are able to determine what a Black story is and what it can be.

At the conclusion of his 1969 essay "What Is an Author," which considers "a culture where discourse would circulate without any need for an author," Michel Foucault posits that "[N]ew questions will be heard: What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where does it come from; how is it circulated; who controls it?" (1408-1409). We still exist within a society where authorship and originality are of interest—living, breathing subjects are writing books—but we are now faced with a novel discourse, one generated by AI, and Foucault's questions are more relevant than ever. By what processes *exactly* does this new writing come into existence, and what are the power relations involved in that process? Who is controlling the narrative here? The answers to these questions seem to change every day, the more (and less) we come to understand about the racial biases

inherent to AI and LLMs, but Bertram's writing expands the boundaries of the arena in which such questions are asked—and in which one day they might be answered.

Travesty Generator (2019)

In the appendix of their 2019 poetry collection *Travesty Generator*, which was longlisted for the National Book Award, Bertram writes that their "recent work considers other ways Black people (much less Black women) are not imagined as readers or authors of texts like programming languages, computer code, and algorithms" (76). The same might even be said of Black people with regard to their being readers or authors of texts like memoirs or poetry collections, and this failure of imagination can be traced directly to the editing and publication process of *The History of Mary Prince*. Salih, editor of the Penguin edition, points out that "Prince does not have the opportunity to develop an authorial persona or voice in her text, which, as we have seen, is relayed to the reader via an editor and an amanuensis, making it less personal and idiosyncratic" (xxvi). Prince is hardly the author of her own story; she merely relates it. Indeed, if we look to the title page of the third edition of *The History*, we see that her name appears in the title of the book itself, but beneath that, in a typeface so small as to be nearly unreadable, are the words "RELATED BY HERSELF," which is then followed by, in larger letters, "WITH A SUPPLEMENT BY THE EDITOR" (1). What is most important here, according to the editors, is not Prince's relating of her own story but the *supplementation* of that story with all manner of prefaces, footnotes, appendices, notes, other narratives, and even poems by the white writer William Cowper. As Allen notes, "Pringle's paratexts overwhelm Prince's story" (511), and the effect of this overwhelming is a diminishment of Prince's role as storyteller—a diminishment perfectly encapsulated in the microscopic typeface of the title page. The white imagination was and, perhaps, still is unable to conceive of Black women capable of telling their own stories.

In the case of Pringle's treatment of Prince, his unimaginativeness overlapped with ignorance, specifically with her use of repetition, a common enough rhetorical device for poets and especially important to Black forms such as the blues, or Jericho Brown's duplex (which Betram draws from and complicates in *Negative Money*, covered in the next section). But, as Allen investigates in her treatment of *The History*, repetition is also important in common, everyday speech. There is a distinct difference between "I knocked on the door repeatedly" and "I knocked on the door over and over again"—the latter's repetition of "over" implies a greater degree of insistence and exhaustiveness, while the former feels more neutral, less emotionally charged. However, in Antiguan Creole (a specific Creole that Prince would likely have been familiar with), repetition serves far more important and complicated linguistic functions (Allen 513). It is precisely these repetitions that Pringle claims to have systematically excised, and so we are left with a text that is haunted by absences. We cannot know what we do not know.

It is interesting, then, to look at how Bertram treats repetition in their writing. As they explain in the appendix to *Travesty Generator*, many of the poems were produced with the aid of Python code adapted from Nick Montfort's "Through the Park" code. Montfort

is a professor of digital media at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and he has developed widely used small-scale poetry generators. Bertram notes that "[t]his code generates stories by randomly omitting different sentences from a prepared list through each iteration" (73). Bertram edits and arranges the raw output of these processes, shaping them into poems, but (much like Pringle's ignorant excisions from Prince's narrative) there is no rhyme or reason to the code's omissions. It is incapable of determining what is or is not meaningful.

In the sequence of poems "//'Incident,'" Bertram runs one of their own poems, a pantoum, "through an online Travesty generator, which gives [the] book its title…The result is a strange parody of the original" (74). The pantoum is a Malaysian poetic form "of indeterminate length composed of quatrains in which the second and fourth lines of each stanza serve as the first and third lines of the next" (Greene 995). Repetition is what *makes* the pantoum, and it is as essential to this poetic form as it is to certain aspects of meaning-making in the Antiguan Creole likely used by Prince. Bertram uses the Travesty generator to create nine versions of their original pantoum, and when repetitions *do* occur, they are not in keeping with the constraints of the pantoum form. Significantly, and most obviously, the repetitions in the generated poems simply *parody* repetitions in the original pantoum that are not specifically the repetitions meant to adhere to the pantoum's strictures. In lines 10 and 13 of Bertram's original pantoum (section "n=0" in the sequence), we encounter "*drip drip drip*," but in "n=8" the Travesty generator seizes on this and explodes it: "let it drip drip drip / drip drip drip drip drip drip drip drip drip drip drip drip drip" (Bertram, lines 2-3). This "drip drip" continues for fourteen more lines before the poem ends abruptly with a truncated "dr" (Bertram, line 17). In Bertram's poetry, by way of AI, repetition is both parodied *and* excised—it is mindlessly emptied of all meaning (or at least the meaning embedded by Bertram in the source text, "n=0"). The unimaginativeness and ignorance with which Pringle shaped Prince's narrative are alive and well today, encoded within the burgeoning technologies of the twenty-first century.

Negative Money (2023)

In his 2019 Pulitzer Prize-winning collection of poetry, *The Tradition*, Jericho Brown laid down the blueprint for the duplex, "a ghazal that is also a sonnet that is also a blues poem of 14 lines…[and] each line [with] 9 to 11 syllables" (Poetry Foundation). A ghazal is "a monorhyme lyric poem originating in Arabia," and, like the pantoum (which is also echoed in Brown's duplex), repetition is a key component to the form (Greene 570). Folded into the duplex, then, are three poetic forms that all lean heavily on repetition: the blues, the ghazal, and the pantoum. The duplex has since become a widely used form in contemporary poetry, and in their most recent full-length collection, *Negative Money*, Bertram investigates the form through the lens of computational poetics.

Betram composed the poem "AI Duplex" through a "[collaboration] with the Talk to Transformer text-generating neural network website" (87). Unlike the previously discussed poems created using a Travesty generator, "AI Duplex" presents itself as something that actually resembles the form it invokes, the duplex. Duplexes, including those written by

Brown himself, usually don't simply repeat lines verbatim; indeed, how the repetitions *differ* generates energy and propels the reader through the poem. We see that trademark subtle echoing at play in the first nine lines of "AI Duplex," but the form breaks down in lines 10-14 (Bertram 29). Lines 10 and 11, which should share at least a few different elements, actually have only one word in common, "I": "my teeth. I miss my mother and old lovers I told // *forever*. I want to know who wrote the code" (29). There is not much here for the ear and eye to register as being repeated, at least not to the degree to which the reader has become accustomed in the first nine lines of the poem. This lack of repetition continues through to the poem's conclusion: in lines 11 and 12, only "I" and "the" are repeated; in lines 12 and 13, only "the" is repeated; and in lines 13 and 14, only "a" is repeated. Also central to the duplex, at least as it was originally conceived of by Brown, is that "[the] first line is echoed in the last line," but there are a total of zero words repeated in lines 1 and 14 (Poetry Foundation).

An echo, to be sure, need not take the form of actual letters and words on the page: a car can echo (or *imply*) a road, and a bird can recall (or *suggest*) a nest. And yet there is something about the way the poem begins with a clear adherence to the duplex's established rules, only to dissolve into lines that are far less reminiscent of Brown's form. Bertram does not reveal the degree to which the Talk to Transformer had a role in shaping this poem's form, and so we cannot be sure of a correlation between the technology and the poem's lack of adherence to the duplex, but again we are met with a poem that claims to be invested in repetition, and yet that repetition does not find a coherent embodiment in the poem itself. In "AI Duplex," Bertram writes: "Computers don't fathom the things that we do…Computers cannot think like us at all." (lines 6-8). The same might be said of Pringle, who did not fathom the things that Prince fathomed, could not think like her at all. That inability—that *unwillingness* to fathom or think in kind—lies at the heart of the erasure of Prince's repetitions.

Now, it is important to note that the restraints of established poetic forms are not fixed, codified, written in stone; it is their fluidity and subjection to experimentation that make them both vital in and of themselves, and *vitalizing* to the world of poetry. The sonnet has undergone great upheavals in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and we are better for it. Brown's duplex, then, is a contribution to a field in which experimentation and reinvention are *expected* and perhaps even demanded. That said, this is a duplex written using AI, and a duplex written by a Black writer who is "interested in using computational tools to investigate computational bias, determinism, and anti-Blackness," and so the differences between Bertram's duplex and Brown's duplex invite themselves to be examined through a lens that accounts for the intersection of race and technology (*A Black Story May Contain* 6). Some poets claim that poems don't have to / shouldn't be / *can't* be political. And yet it seems that through his contribution of the duplex, Brown has provided a tool that is not of the master's tools, and one that Bertram has deployed brilliantly and *politically*.

A Black Story May Contain Sensitive Content (2024)

During the summer of 2023, there was a brief uproar on Twitter (now known as X) when Bertram won the New Michigan Press / *DIAGRAM* chapbook contest. A number of folks (many of whom were writers who had themselves submitted to the contest) complained about the fact that Bertram's manuscript, *A Black Story May Contain Sensitive Content*, had been written with the aid of AI. Many of the disgruntled writers seemed to think that the decision to use AI naturally entailed a lack of imagination. For example, on August 1, 2023, one Twitter user claimed that they weren't mad about an AI-assisted work winning the contest, they were simply "uninterested": "I want to engage with a writer's imagination, not their use of a tool to substitute for using their imagination" (@ mattie2twi).

To my mind, this is an echo of a long-held romantic belief that true artists compose their art in a vacuum, that great paintings and poems should flow purely and spontaneously from the brain. In fact (consciously or not), artists are always in search of tools that might aid them in their endeavors, and no poet cuts through the dark solely by the light of their own unique intelligence.

As another example, consider a meme, sourced from the 2005 film *Robots*, that operates on the underlying assumption that humanity and technology comprise a binary, that they are diametrically opposed; it was attached to one of the many outraged posts in response to *DIAGRAM*'s announcement that Bertram had won the chapbook contest. The meme depicts one robot saying to a pair of other robots, "Thanks for still believing in me" (@ComicsNerd2). Undoubtedly, the X user was trying to imply that Bertram is an unskilled poet who has enlisted a technology for their own poetic purposes, and the technology is grateful to have been of use in the securing of a book deal (the meme is unintentionally ironic, as there are no humans depicted). But the relationship between humanity and technology is more complicated than these X users suppose, especially where the arts are concerned. After all, "technology" comes to us from the Greek: tekhnē ("art," "craft") + -logia ("denoting a subject of study or interest"). Art is nested within our very conception of technology. (Keep in mind that this explosion of discourse occurred more than six months before Bertram's chapbook was even published.)

"Tell Me a Black Story," one of the three sections in *A Black Story May Contain Sensitive Content*, consists of a series of AI-generated responses to that very imperative: "Tell me a Black story." Bertram worked with two LLMs to produce the section: the standard GPT-3 model, and "Warpland 2.0," Bertram's own GPT-3 model trained on a corpus of texts by Gwendolyn Brooks. There is a kind of destabilizing whiplash that ensues when jumping back and forth between the outputs of these two models (the section is laid out so that a GPT-3 output is followed by a Warpland 2.0 output, and so on). Bertram expounds on these differences in an essay that opens their chapbook:

> The generic model [GPT-3] tended to respond at a distance (third person or omniscient narrator) and told a very short story in which a Black person was at a severe racial disadvantage but overcame it in some way. The narrative shape and scope are clear: Black people had it rough because of racism; they worked hard or else somehow

changed their circumstances; things got better; the end… In contrast
Warpland was usually first-person, and while it isn't devoid of some
of the same tropes (challenges and uplift) it was generally more
loving towards Black people and speaks as if it were of or among
a Black community. The story "shape" is more irregular. This isn't
surprising if you know Brooks's work. (7)

Indeed, the generic model outputs are uninteresting at best and offensive at worst, where-
as Warpland 2.0's outputs are strange, nuanced, layered, complicated, unpredictable,
and fresh. There is an uncanny aura that forms around the text, when reading the War-
pland 2.0 outputs, as though you are communing with a human intelligence. As Bertram
notes, "[t]his is not writing by Gwendolyn Brooks…[though] the text is indeed haunted
by Brooks; it pulses with the vibrancy of her singular sensibility…" (12). And yet we do
not possess an unadulterated source text for Prince; all we have is the Pringle-inflected
story that has been largely stripped of its teller. A GPT-3 model trained on Prince would
require a text that does not exist.

Conclusion

In her introduction to *The History*, Salih considers the claim that "Prince, and most of
the other black writers at this time, used 'the master's pieces' (to borrow Henry Louis
Gates's phrase) to express themselves," and that the resulting texts constituted a laugh-
able "mimicry" of whiteness. That mimicry, Salih notes, "could be regarded as a radical
gesture, and these texts undermine the authority of colonial discourse and the validity
of its (hitherto uncontested) theories by affirming both the authorship and the authentic
humanity of the black subject…" (xvi). The undermining of colonial discourse continues
today, albeit in different shapes and by different means. AI and LLMs might arguably be
the most powerful, complex and frightening articulations of "the master's pieces" we
have ever seen. As Bertram reminds us, "[o]f course large language models are biased.
They were born of the internet, and the internet is a biased place. It is an ultimate mir-
ror" (*A Black Story May Contain* 6).

But there is a significant distinction to be made between Prince and Bertram. Salih
writes that "Mary Prince's *History* does not quite exemplify [the aforementioned] tex-
tual radicalism, since it was not written entirely by her…" (xvi). Conversely—and ironi-
cally—the textual radicalism of Bertram's books is at least partially a function of the fact
that they *weren't* written entirely by Bertram (nor can we even confidently deduce *who*
wrote them).

Bertram's book was published in 2024, and yet the AI systems it interrogates are al-
ready obsolete. We are in the world of GPT-4 now, and we are no closer to being able to
grapple with the Pandora's box ripped open by AI and LLMs. What is sensitive content,
who decides whether it is sensitive, and what do we do with our knowledge of that sen-
sitivity? In late February 2024, the Associated Press reported that Google's AI-powered
Gemini chatbot refused to generate images depicting the Arab Spring, the George Floyd

protests, or Tiananmen Square, and in one instance the chatbot said that "it didn't want to contribute to the spread of misinformation or 'trivialization of sensitive topics'" (Associated Press). It is valid to fear the spread of misinformation, especially considering the proliferation of deepfakes, but the chatbot's unwillingness to depict key moments in history is likewise troubling. Pringle butchered Prince's story in order to "spare the prudish sensibilities of potential readers," and as a result we are left with a text that falls short of honoring Prince's voice and agency. We find ourselves at a similar crossroads today, only now we must contend with both human and nonhuman intelligences.

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