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The Shy Underground

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The Secret Life of a Black Aspie: A New Form of Slave Narrative

In his memoir *The Secret Life of a Black Aspie*, author Anand Prahlad describes his internal life and experiences as a Black man with autism spectrum disorder. At the outset of the book, Prahlad warns the reader that his disability necessarily makes his act of life writing unconventional, laying out the differences between his way of perceiving his memory and the way a neurotypical person would. These differences emerge throughout the memoir, not just in Prahlad's act of remembering, but also in the way he perceives and interacts with the world. The memoir addresses issues of memory, time, nature, and history that may seem universalized, but Prahlad's experiences with these concepts deviate greatly from the norm.

Deviations from the norm, which are a direct result of Prahlad's disability, explode the possibilities of what life writing is and what it can do. Memoir, a genre dependent upon one's memory and experiences, is drastically affected by new, provocative ways of conceiving of these central aspects of life. While Prahlad still depends upon memory and experience, his perceptions of them alter what he is able to do through the act of life writing. This fact is specifically true when considering Prahlad's interests in American slavery and historical questions of Blackness in the United States. *The Secret Life of a Black Aspie* represents new possibilities of historical documentation that exist beyond the Western, neurotypical manner in which memory is usually understood, possibilities that are only made possible through Prahlad's disability and the way he conceives the world.

Literature, like all media or artforms, both shapes and is shaped by the society in which it is produced. For that reason, literature, and our understanding of it, is often defined by the frameworks in which we, as readers, already experience the world. However, genres of literature that question the supposed “laws” of living – the things we all take for granted or assume to be true – may help to change the public perception of how the world operates. L.H. Stallings makes this argument in relation to Black science fiction, writing that “if we rely on other senses, what is felt – affect and emotion – we might come to understand that science fiction not only matters, it *is* matter. Other senses that might help create value and theory about the materiality of imagination are consistently addressed when we examine how certain writers imagine science and the uses of science in an effort to critique social reality that devalues affect, emotion, and imagination” (225). Stallings explains how science fiction, and indeed any literature that questions the assumptions we make about how the universe works, has been used by Black writers to question the valuation of certain aspects of life, namely affect, emotion, and imagination.

Prahlad does not write science fiction. *The Secret Life of a Black Aspie* is a memoir, a work of nonfiction, and should be read as such. However, it can also be read as a text that defies what we may assume to be unilaterally true in human experience. If, as Stallings argues, our conceptions of emotion and imagination are defined by a society that has oppressed Black people and suppressed their ideas, the artform of the memoir has certainly been affected by that. Prahlad’s unique conceptions of the world in which he lives, which derives from both his race and his disability, show the reader just how much of their conception of memory and the past are defined by societal conventions that have excluded people of color and neurodivergent people since their inceptions. However, more than just showing the limitations of our Western ideals of

memory, Prahlad's memoir introduces the radical possibility that there can be additions to the existing historical documentation of slavery in the United States – but only if we forget what we assume to be the laws of memory, history, and recollection in Western, neurotypical society.

The “slave narrative” is an important tool for the historical understanding of slavery in the United States. As scholar Michelle Jarman argues, “Slave narratives were intended, in many ways, to detail the horrors of captivity. Living conditions, lack of food, overwork, and the brutal violence of many slaveholders, all contributed to corporeal and psychic suffering” (157). Jarman does not just illustrate how slave narratives can be used as historical source, but she attributes usage as historical source as one of the intended purposes of the writing of slave narratives to begin with, as she states that slave narratives were meant to detail a general horror of captivity, rather than just detailing the life of one person who is enslaved. This act of historicization means that even personal stories of slavery become, in public conception, emblematic of what slavery was like “as a whole.”

As historical resources go, however, slave narratives are finite, at least in a first-person nonfictional sense. Because there are no longer people alive who were enslaved in the United States, the life writings of these people are extinct. There is, of course, what has become known as the “neo-slave narrative,” a term first identified by Bernard Bell (Li 326), but those are texts written after the centuries of slavery in America that detail fictional events surrounding slavery and how they relate to modern conceptions of race and Blackness, such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. In works like these, Black literature necessarily shatters the concepts of time and space to interrogate questions of race and disability, as Therí Alyce Pickens points out in the context of speculative fiction. She contends that “When speculative fiction writers suspend time, space, and culture, they force further apart the disjuncture between what is natural and what is cultural

inheritance” (13). Prahlad honestly depicts the experience of a disabled man experiencing life’s chronology in a nonstandard manner, and he communicates with the ghosts of slaves to break the form of life writing and provide nonfictional, first-person slave narrative written decades after the deaths of the last formerly enslaved people.

The historical consequence of the lack of recent first-person slave narratives is that both historians and storytellers must turn to older extant first-person slave narratives to understand the lived experience of enslaved people. Historical accounts of slavery have been important materials for generations of authors contributing to the canon of the neo-slave narrative. For example, when writing her 2010 neo-slave narrative *The Long Song*, writer Andrea Levy had to turn to centuries-old memoirs, testimonies, or journals (Gadpaille 3). Authors like Levy who continue to contribute to the literary canon of information regarding slavery have a limited number of resources upon which to draw, as first-person slave narratives can no longer be written when there are no living survivors of American slavery. First-person slave narratives have also been important tools in the practice of history for historians who study the history of American slavery. For example, scholar Tyler D. Parry writes about the importance of interviews done by the Works Progress Administration with formerly enslaved people for historians of American slavery (275). First-person slave narratives, for both the author of the neo-slave narrative and the historian, are imperative and, in a certain sense, extinct. However, Prahlad’s access to the lived experience of enslaved people through spirits, through land, and through objects allows readers to engage with narratives that may not exist in the literal archives of slave narratives. By exploding norms of time and memory, Prahlad allows the greater public access to missing information that may be imperative for both our historical understanding of American slavery and the continuation of the neo-slave narrative as a literary genre, an important one that lets us

understand slavery's impact on contemporary society.

Concepts of chrononormativity that pertain to the study of life writing as well as most popular conceptions of memoir rely upon a Eurocentric and neurotypical understanding of how time works, whereas works by Black authors, and particularly Black authors with disability, necessarily subvert ideas of time and space. Citing several Black authors including Octavia E. Butler, Nalo Hopkinson, Tananarive Due, and Mat Johnson, Pickens argues that "Their conversations about time, social location, space, and place invite readers to reexamine how to read Blackness and madness alongside each other" (13). Because so much of Western society's idea of time is tied up in the experience of whiteness and neurotypicality, Black speculative fiction writers necessarily break the molds in which time and space place them.

While *The Secret Life of a Black Aspie* is not speculative fiction, Prahlad does a similar thing in the memoir. The treatment of Black people in the United States has caused so much generational trauma that oftentimes the bounds of time itself have to be broken in order to properly depict living experience. Similarly, writing by authors who are both Black and have disabilities requires a further warping of what we may consider "standard time," especially for an author with autism whose literal lived experience of time and memory works in a different way than the experience of the neurotypical norm. Black American literature, and especially Black American literature by disabled writers, necessarily subverts ideas of time that we may hold as "standard" because of both generational trauma and nonnormative forms of experiencing time.

Prahlad's initial disclaimer about the nature of his life writing opens the door for questions of time and place. He explains, "Before I start telling you about my life, though, I should share with you a secret: I don't remember most of it... My memory doesn't stick to things. It sticks to colors, and temperatures, and tastes. I remember mostly sensory details and

ideas, because those are the things that I experience as most real” (9). At the very beginning of his memoir, Prahlad explains how his book will necessarily break from traditional practices of life writing and how these breaks are specifically related to his disability and how he conceives of his lived experience. Works of life writing typically rely upon chronological event-based memory. Prahlad alerts the reader early on that this assumption of “standard” remembering is neurotypical and that his memoir will conform to his own experience of memory: one that relies upon sensory details rather than straightforward narrative chronology.

One of the clearest ways that Prahlad breaks standard rules of chronology is his ability to access the past in a literal way through communication with spirits, particularly the spirits of enslaved people. Prahlad claims that he began to interact with enslaved people as early as just after his own birth, as meeting the spirit of an enslaved boy named Jeremiah is his second-ever memory (19). Continued interactions with these spirits, particularly Jeremiah, become the “first-hand” material for Prahlad’s unconventional slave narrative. For example, Jeremiah tells him, “I never had a mama and daddy the way you do. They was sold off. There was a woman who was like a mama, though. They called her Aunt Rachel. She looked out for me in the tobacco fields. The leaves would sometimes cut my arms and hands” (38). This quote clearly breaks the traditional chronology we expect in life writing, as Prahlad can reach across generations to discuss the living conditions of a person decades prior. This quote, while a personal experience of Jeremiah’s relayed to Prahlad, thus becomes a kind of historical source. Jeremiah’s singular experience of captivity gives readers a sense of what the lived experience of slavery was like, just as a first-hand memoir written by him would have. Prahlad’s communication with spirits allows him to break standard ideas of chronology to bring historical truths of slavery to the forefront of his memoir.

Prahlad perhaps even more obviously breaks conventions of chronology through the organization of the memoir itself. The book is structured unlike most memoirs that rely upon typical chronological organization, instead being mostly structured around colors, with many chapter titles mentioning specific colors and careful attention paid to the colors of the world around him. Those colors manifest themselves both in a more “standard” way and in “nonstandard ways,” such as Prahlad’s ability to feel colorful auras radiate off other people’s bodies. The section of the memoir that best exemplifies Prahlad’s reliance on color as a new sort of chronology, entitled “The Purple Time,” describes the titular period as one where, as he states, “I forgot the things they say you always have to remember; at least, I forgot them with my mind. I forgot that I was a man. I forgot that I was black. I forgot that I came from a plantation in the South and that I was close to my family. I forgot about my family” (133). Many authors of memoir may move from one event to the next based upon location or time, but Prahlad orients us based on the color that he felt in this period: purple. Divorcing himself from the expectations to present a “standard” memoir to readers and scholars of life writing, he describes his honest way of experiencing memory, which, as noted above, “sticks to color” (9). Prahlad’s earnest description of his perception of periods of his life becomes radical because he refuses to give into the neurotypical ideals of how experience should be recorded in a nonfiction work of life writing.

However, in memoirs written by authors with more “standard” forms of recollection than Prahlad, chronology might be similarly challenged through generational memory. Anthropologist Stephan Feuchtwang uses the term “haunting memory” to describe “what we are induced to remember as our own memory even though it is the story of our intimate forebears extending and haunting our recollection” (271). Through methods including oral storytelling and documentary archival, a sort of cultural memory can be collected and passed down to future generations,

informing their identities based upon what their ancestors literally experienced, rather than what they did themselves. These aspects of identity can be hard to describe because they do not come from memories that are built from literal lived experience, or at least, not one's own lived experience. However, they appear in life writing nonetheless because they are haunting memories—not just stories that are passed down by forebearers, but memories that are accepted as one's own and that thus affect the identity of the writer.

Prahlad includes haunting memories in his memoir as well, and those appear alongside the first-hand accounts that Jeremiah and the other spirits give him to fit Bell's definition of the neo-slave narrative. Prahlad writes, "I had learned a lot from growing up in the shadow of slavery. Slaves had to have six senses. They had to pay attention to small things, to small routines, to other people's view of things" (69). In this passage, Prahlad explains how his ancestors' experiences of slavery affected his own childhood in school and inform the manner in which he views his own identity. Prahlad explains how his need to pay attention to how those around him would react to his differences is a direct result of growing up "in the shadow" of slavery. This includes growing up with the stories of his enslaved ancestors haunting his own memories and identity. Since Bell's argument about the neo-slave narrative is that it must include a point about how slavery has affected the lived experiences of people of color in the United States in the contemporary, Prahlad's usage of haunting memory qualifies the memoir as a neo-slave narrative. However, while haunting memory may appear in most other works of life writing, as well as most other people's own minds, the aspects of Prahlad's memoir that set it apart are the ways in which his disability interacts with aspects of experience that readers may have taken for granted – neurotypical, Western conceptions of what memory is.

Prahlad's conceptions of where memory lives also create provocative new possibilities

about how chronology can work in a memoir, and that new type of chronology further allows the memoir to comment on the lived experience of slavery. He explains memory through a kind of physical location: “The earth remembers things. DNA remembers. Objects and things remember” (19). To Prahlad, memory, and therefore history, are entrenched in the natural world. Memories are contained within the earth itself – its ground, its trees, all of its nature – which allows him to connect with the history of the places he inhabits. His interactions with nature throughout the memoir then become acts of remembering, because to Prahlad, people across time are connected through the earth. This means that Prahlad can access historical sources that neurotypical people may not be able to, discovering historical truths about the lived experience of being a person of color in the southern United States prior to when his own “personal” memories would begin.

If nature holds so many memories for Prahlad, a connection to those memories can be used as a framework to understand his love for and interest in nature itself, which is evident many times throughout the memoir. He writes about his interest in nature from an early age in the context of a favorite book of his when he was young: “The book set about the plant kingdom was also divided into several volumes. I was most interested in flowers and trees and all the magical things about them. Just reading some of the words and thinking about what they stood for was a kind of ecstasy. Reading ‘fruits,’ ‘seeds,’ ‘leaves,’ ‘blossoms,’ ‘pistil,’ ‘stamen,’ ‘pollen,’ ‘buds,’ and ‘roots’ and looking at the pictures was like having Christmas morning, over and over and over” (81). Prahlad has a love for and connection to nature, but specifically plants and trees, things that grow from the soil, and the “magical things” about them. A connection to his past seems evident here, as he is explicit that the soil near his house is where his sense of family history and ancestry comes from. The plants that grow from these areas could then contain this connection inside of them, in the form of what Prahlad refers to as “magic.” Every

experience that Prahlad has related to nature, which is much of the memoir, then can be interpreted as a reflection of his feelings about his history and his family. His love of nature, and specifically the supernatural, nontangible things contained inside nature, reflects his strong connection to his family history, which is what makes him such a compelling narrator of *The Secret Life of a Black Aspie* read as a slave narrative; Prahlad understands, inhabits, and communicates with his enslaved ancestors in an effortless way, just by reacting to the world around him. Prahlad's intense relationship with nature shows his authority as an accessor of the memories of his forebearers.

These memories seem particularly personal to Prahlad and specifically southern, as he has a harder time accessing them as he travels to other places. Once Prahlad arrives at the University of California, Los Angeles, he struggles with a perceived "lack of earth," as he claims, "There is no earth, no green, no softness. Everything is too far, and the brightness of sun off metal and glass is blinding. There are too few trees to filter the light, and so some of it ricochets off the ocean of glass, cars, and rooftops, rises and explodes over the city like a nuclear bomb" (178). What Prahlad misses when he leaves the American South is its nature, especially the plants and trees. He states that he values the earth because memories live inside of it. By revealing that the earth that he values is available to him particularly in the South, and that other places like California do not have suitable earth for his purposes, he implies that there is something specific to the identity of the south that is held inside these geographic memories. The earth in California does not remember because it cannot, there is not enough of it and because the memories that Prahlad is specifically tied to exist in a different location. This shows the book's utility as a slave narrative because Prahlad's connections and abilities lie in the environment where the memories of slavery live for him: the South.

Prahlad not only reads earth as a historical object but describes nature as living in a way that allows it to communicate much like the spirits to which he talks. On that point, he says, “When I went into buildings with wood, I could hear the trees still talking... Some museums were like that. So the artwork and trees could talk to each other” (141). Prahlad’s memoir is clearly one where the laws of physics do not apply, so he is able to access the memories of objects around him, such as walls, but only if they are connected to the Earth. This shows how Prahlad has a special connection with geography more than he does with just objects; concrete does not interact with him the same way as nature. His connection to the nature of his own birthplace makes sense both in the context of life writing and the context of slavery. Martin Dines, for instance, discusses different interpretations of “poetic geography” in his book *The Literature of Suburban Change*. “Poetic geography” is the idea that there is a geography beyond literal whereabouts – that place and location can be used to expand upon some deeper idea involving one’s selfhood or identity. In the context of British slavery, Jessica Moody explains that despite lacking an official monument recognizing the institution of slavery in Liverpool, the city contains multiple sites of historical memory relating to slavery without government-sanctioned public memorial (218). Through both the lenses of life writing and slavery, the Earth brings Prahlad closer to his past.

Prahlad’s specific correlation between his ancestors’ enslavement and the soil around him relate all his observations about nature and physical space to the experiences of slavery that he relays throughout the memoir. He explains this connection: “In the soil around our houses were the broken bodies of great-great-great-great, great-great-great, great-great, and great relatives. Were the bones and ashes of my family who had been slaves” (19). In this sense, his enslaved ancestors have combined with the geography and nature around his house, and that connection

influences all of his encounters with nature as interactions with his own history and his family's own history rather than just with the Earth. Thus, when Prahlad arrives in California, the green he misses is not just a longing for nature that somehow connects him with his ancestors in an abstract way; for the first time, Prahlad is separated from the physical bodies of his family. While this distance from an ancestor's remains may be difficult for someone of any culture, Moody notes the particular significance of gravesites for the formerly enslaved (236). While Moody explains the significance of the sighting of ghosts of enslaved people in Liverpool, she nonetheless illustrates how the displacing nature of slavery could make one's connections to their enslaved ancestors' remains stronger. Enslaved people who were forced across the world by their oppressors finally have one final resting place, where they remain, at least in a physical form. This sense of location in the ground means that the descendants of enslaved people may have an especially strong relationship to a specific piece of land. Prahlad's interactions with nature are tied specifically to the importance of his ancestors' remains being buried in the area surrounding his childhood home.

Despite his connection to his hometown specifically, Prahlad's ability to speak with authority about the lived experience of slavery comes from his lack of chronological and geographic restrictions and his ability to break the laws of physics. He describes his grandmother's house, for instance, as "a gateway between centuries, a vortex for moving back and forth between worlds. It was not quite in the nineteenth century but not quite in the twentieth either" (26-27). Much of Prahlad's connections to his family's history come from the time he spends in his grandmother's house, as it acts as a sort of portal to the past for him. Prahlad's unique way of experiencing history and time allows him to access the past in a way that deviates from norms of chronology that may be typical in a Western memoir. The fact that he can access

vortexes and communicate with the spirits of enslaved people makes him an authority on the issues and experiences of slavery in a way that other living people are not able to be anymore. However, it is interesting to note that he does not claim that this vortex allows him to experience the nineteenth century exactly, just that it transports him to a time that is neither fully the nineteenth century nor the twentieth century. This distinction means that he does not experience slavery first-hand in the standard way that the authors of first-hand slave narratives did. Prahlad's memoir then becomes a new kind of slave narrative, one that did not exist before him – a combination of the neo-slave narratives that speak on contemporary culture and the first-hand slave narratives that come from a place of literal lived experience. Prahlad's unique conceptions of time and space allow him to exist as both a writer of neo-slave narrative and first-hand slave narrative.

With that being said, Prahlad's experiences with the history of slavery in both his hometown and his family history extend beyond talking to spirits and reading objects and land as having memory; he experiences the pain, and in some ways the life experiences, of his enslaved ancestors as his own. Prahlad describes a recurring instance in his childhood: "When I was five, I would fall sometimes when I felt lashes sting my back. I'd be chasing a ball my brother threw or running in high grass, for a moment starting to feel happy, to believe in happiness. But suddenly a lash would cut me across my back. I would lie face down in grass or dirt, in a yard I didn't recognize, screaming" (23). Such a memory—of being physically affected by the harm inflicted on his ancestors, feeling the same physical pain—breaks norms of time and space. Here again we can discern the dual workings of Prahlad's style, which works as both a first-hand and a neo-slave narrative, by depicting both the legacy of slavery continues to haunt the people living in contemporary American society and the experiences of the pain of slavery on one's own body.

While the actual act of punishment may not literally happen to him the way that it did his enslaved ancestors, Prahlad's memoir is one that describes a first-hand account of experiencing physical pain as a result of that punishment. This is a feature of the memoir that only exists to readers because of his disability; his nonstandard way of experiencing time that ties him to his ancestors allows himself to believably write first-hand about the pain of slavery, centuries after the end of American slavery and decades after the death of the last formerly enslaved people.

Prahlad's deep connection to his own culture, family, and history is further illustrated by how isolated he feels from other people, which illustrates his status as both himself and a vessel for his ancestors. Prahlad writes about his interactions with other people as feeling like speaking to members of another species entirely: "I became the alien in their midst. I inhaled the light. I inhaled even more deeply at times when I felt the familiar anxiety that there was something so wrong with me. That I had no right to happiness. I inhaled as if I was draining smoke from a giant bong when I felt the familiar guilt that I was simply fooling other people, pretending to be one of them" (190). He explicitly claims, "My whole life I had thought that I was from another planet, that someday the ship would come for me and take me home" (3). Because Prahlad carries his family around with him in a more literal way than other people, and because his ways of experiencing the world are so vastly different than the neurotypical white people he meets once he leaves his hometown, he struggles to even consider himself the same species as other people. Prahlad's deep discomfort with other people provides a foil to the connection he feels with his own family members and community members, even ones that died before his birth. If Prahlad is another species entirely than most people, but can share a personhood with his ancestors, he has a clear connection to his ancestors that most others would not be able to possess. It is this connection that makes Prahlad a fitting narrator for a slave narrative despite the

fact that he was physically born after the end of slavery in America. He connects to those he has not “met” more than he connects with mostly everybody he does “meet” in a physical sense. Prahlad’s disability allows him to feel deep connections with his ancestors, shown through his inability to connect with others, which makes his writing on slavery more authoritative and powerful.

The only people Prahlad depicts as that close to him, especially in his childhood, aside from his family are the enslaved spirits that he meets. He writes, “The spirits I love the most were Jeremiah and Beulah and Lizzy. They were all slave children who often played with me” (36). The characters in the memoir that make most of an impact on Prahlad are the ones that have most of a tie to both his family history and the history of slavery on the land he inhabits. *The Secret Life of a Black Aspie* reads as a slave narrative particularly because of this; most encounters that Prahlad has with people who he considers close to him, especially when he is a child, come from people who serve as a reminder of slavery or provide him with information about his own life through slavery. His ancestors’ experiences in slavery affect the way he behaves in his “present,” but so do the literal spirits of enslaved children with which he spends much of his time in childhood. His interactions with these spirits inform his life, and he proves this by describing their specific and individualized characteristics to the reader. Life as a disabled Black child in the South is not a joyless experience for Prahlad, and almost every example of him experiencing joy, particularly intense joy, comes from his relationships with the spirits and his family. Prahlad’s particular closeness to the spirits of enslaved children show how the events of his childhood are all affected by the slavery that occurred on the land on which he lives generations beforehand, which makes all of his interactions afterwards a result of that slavery, resulting in the memoir becoming a unique but functional example of a modern day slave

narrative.

Besides its place as a most recent addition to the canon of slave narratives in a time where the number of first-person slave narratives available to the public is not growing, an important effect of considering *The Secret Life of a Black Aspie* a first-person slave narrative is that the time in which it was written makes it uniquely able to deal with the intersection of race and disability among enslaved people in a way that initial first-person slave narratives were not. Jarman highlights the ways in which even historical slave narratives discussed illness and disability because “illness and disability among captives, often produced by slavery, were also treated with cruel neglect. In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), the author describes an incident working in the field, when, nauseous from heat stroke, he fell to the ground” (157). Jarman’s example of Douglass’s memoir shows how historical slave narratives portrayed instances and stories in which enslaved people were treated especially poorly due to illness or disability. However, one of the benefits of reading a slave narrative that was written by someone who has also experienced life in our current era, as Prahlad has, is that the author is able to discuss issues of disability in ways that have been developed and normalized since Douglass’s death, for instance. Prahlad speaks explicitly and candidly about autism spectrum disorder, and he describes many of his nonstandard ways of experiencing time and space as related to his disability. For instance, his interactions with spirits is not just a result of growing up in the place where he did, but is due to his specific way of perceiving the world through his disability: “My sisters and brothers couldn’t see the spirits, but I could see them” (38). However, he also writes about the lack of understanding of autism spectrum disorder and other disabilities in the Black community, as he recalls, “When I’ve told black people that I have autism, or Asperger’s syndrome, they’ve often said, ‘No you don’t’” (8). One of the first places he finds

people who experience the world in the same way as him is when he communicates with the enslaved spirits. He shares his deep connection with and personification of nature with Jeremiah, for instance: “I asked Jeremiah once who the wind was, and where it came from. How could it suddenly appear and disappear? Was the wind a woman or a man? How could it stay invisible? He said he didn’t know – he wondered the same thing. ‘But the night is something you can walk on,’ he said. ‘Like a road’” (37). This passage illustrates how Prahlad explicitly depicts an enslaved person who experiences the world in the same way he does – a way that he defines as a symptom of his autism. The radical implication is that Prahlad is able to use modern terminology of disability, diagnoses like autism and Asperger’s syndrome, in his discussions of slavery and enslaved people. While scholars have used the first-person slave narrative to discuss the intersections between race and disability in the past, conceiving of *The Secret Life of a Black Aspie* as a slave narrative allows us to have discussions of these issues in a more modern manner.

One of the more interesting and provocative revelations about disability and slavery that Prahlad brings to light comes from his discussion of his ancestors’ experiences. When describing his female forebearers’ methods to escape sexual abuse from their enslavers, Prahlad tells, “Sometimes they call out to one of the other slaves, as if they needed help with something, when the bosses grabbed them. Or they acted like they were ‘crazy,’ and made jokes about poisoning them. The bosses were afraid of ‘crazy’ slave women” (21). This story portrays a kind of performance of disability, madness, or “craziness” for defense purposes. Prahlad’s ancestors used disability, whether feigned or not, with intention to escape harsh treatment from their enslavers. This ties neatly with Pickens’ argument that “In an ideological construct of white supremacy, Blackness is considered synonymous with madness or the prerequisite for creating madness” (4). If the conception of “craziness” in a society built on white supremacy, such as the United States’,

comes from a place of fearing the “other,” specifically nonwhite people and more specifically Black people, then utilizing that fear intentionally against the oppressor becomes a useful method of survival. That is exactly what Prahlad describes his female enslaved ancestors as doing: utilizing the oppressors’ conceptions of “craziness” against them for the sake of survival. Only in a modern slave narrative, whether that be Prahlad’s or a more standard neo-slave narrative, could one unpack the baggage that has come from decades of scholarship about disability and race in order to argue that there were positive aspects to the performance of disability during the era of slavery. It is when Prahlad inhabits his ancestors’ bodies or when he travels through a vortex that he separates himself from the neo-slave narrative and is able to write about these issues from a first-person positionality, where he is specifically qualified as a person who both has experienced modern conversations of disability and diagnosis, as well as the era of slavery.

Questions of historical documentation arise when considering Prahlad as a narrator of not only his own experience but the experiences of his enslaved ancestors. For this reason, Prahlad himself does not even frame the memoir as an act of historical documentation, rather just a tool for readers to understand him on a personal level. He introduces the book by saying it will help readers “understand why my real life is such a secret” (11). While Prahlad includes information about the world beyond himself, including most notably history and geography, he is explicit in the fact that his memoir is best read as a way to understand him and his life. In this sense, perhaps the historical information in the novel is best read as context for Prahlad’s own life rather than an act of documentation or any sort of act of historiography of slavery. However, certain details, especially retellings of information from Jeremiah, seem to be specific examples of slavery-related events that hold little connection to Prahlad’s “present” life and rather seem included solely for history’s sake. For example, Jeremiah’s revelation about his lack of parents

and his Aunt Rachel seems to be exclusively information about Jeremiah that does not come up again to affect Prahlad's life in any way beyond learning another specific detail about the enslaved spirits he befriends. This passage is an example of one that seems included for the sake of historical documentation, and where understanding historical truths about slavery is the primary focus, and understanding Prahlad as a person is either a secondary focus or not a focus at all.

Additionally, Prahlad makes clear that the act of communicating, whether by speaking or writing, is an act of defining oneself and one's culture to him, and one of the primary reasons for his speech since childhood has been to redefine ideas of Blackness from a historical standpoint. He writes, "But when history changed us, that's when I really started to talk. I was trying to bring the sweetness back. I was trying to hold onto things. Being sweet was a big thing for people where I lived" (58). Prahlad sees himself as a reflection of not only his own experiences; he sees his very ability to communicate as an act of resistance against history. When an outside narrative, specifically what Prahlad refers to as "history," steps in to threaten the way that he and his community and family are represented, Prahlad feels compelled to speak for the first time in childhood because he is trying to return to a place of "sweetness" and good-heartedness that he knows is inherent in his community. In this sense, every bit of communication that Prahlad has in his memoir, and especially the act of writing a memoir itself, can be seen as an act of historicizing, or an attempt to take back his own people's narrative by someone from their own culture. While Prahlad is explicit that *The Secret Life of a Black Aspie* is a memoir and does not explicitly call it an act of history writing, scholars such as Duncan Koerber have advocated for life writing as tool for understanding the work of doing history (52). Koerber's framework for life writing as a form of recording history seems particularly apt in the case of Prahlad and his

relationship to slavery. He states that his communication comes from a place of trying to resist others' narratives about his own people, and the cultural memory of slavery in the United States has been defined by Western and neurotypical viewpoints of what history and memory are. Prahlad may refer to *The Secret Life of a Black Aspie* as memoir, but that does not exclude it from being about larger cultural truths, as well.

Prahlad is, from the memoir's outset, aware of the pushback that he may receive in terms of his reliability to the audience and dispels with these concerns. His disclaimer reads, "The third thing to remember is that most of what I tell you is literal to me, even if it seems like I'm speaking in metaphors. People have been trying to take my experiences away from me all of my life by saying things like 'You're so dramatic,' 'You exaggerate so much,' 'You're so extreme,' or 'It's all in your mind,' as if their experiences aren't also in their minds. My mind works differently; that's all" (11). Through the history of life writing, audiences have been concerned with the cultural reliability of authors. Scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue, "Readers have expectations about who has the cultural authority to tell a particular kind of life story. They also have expectations about what stories derived from direct, personal knowledge should assert. For instance, readers expect the slave narrative to be written by an ex-slave" (36). Readers generally understand and excuse concepts like Feuchtwang's "haunting memory," even if the experiences written about did not literally happen to the author and are generational in nature, because they often experience memory in the same way as the author. Prahlad pushes against the questions of reliability posed by Smith and Watson because, according to him, the audience has no vantage point from which to understand Prahlad's conceptions of life due to the combination of race, disability, time, and power that might converge to make a reader resistant to his enterprise. Nonetheless, he implores readers to understand his words and his stories literally and

open their minds to a type of memoir that deviates from the neurotypical Western norms of memory and experience.

This dispelling of norms that Prahlad utilizes in his memoir allows *The Secret Life of a Black Aspie* to ask challenging questions – what can happen when perceptions of time, geography, and history that are taken for granted by Western society are challenged in the act of life writing? What can we learn? The result is a provocative amount about the lived experience of slavery, an amount that would not be possible without Prahlad's ability to portray the present and the past simultaneously, a symptom of his disability.

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