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The Weave of Youth Writing: Refiguring Authorship and Self-Representation in Michaela DePrince’s Collaborative Archive of Life Narrative Texts

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Abstract

Young people have to struggle in navigating the complex cultural and socio-political frameworks of production if they would like to reclaim agency and legitimacy to voice their aspirations. This article focuses on questions of authorship and self-representation in both the traditional and digital life writing texts created by and produced for Sierra-Leonean-American ballet dancer Michaela DePrince, which turn out to be highly mediated by her Jewish Caucasian adoptive mother Elaine DePrince. I argue that the manners of Michaela’s collaborative archive of life narrative projects—which bring about issues of authorship—have conformed her self-representation to particular identity frames in terms of race, power, and access to the tools of representation. Correspondingly, through her traditional and digital advocacy, Michaela has performed as a narrator who depicts white privilege and colourblindness in order to appeal to the white middlebrow audience, while at the same time reinforcing the market value of black trauma.

Keywords: Michaela DePrince; authorship; self-representation; youth life writing; collaborative archive

Introduction

In September 2011, a fourteen-year-old black ballerina garnered worldwide praise and attention after starring in *First Position*, an American documentary film about six young ballet dancers competing in the Youth America Grand Prix (YAGP) for a place at an elite ballet school or company in New York City (*First Position*). The black ballerina in question was Michaela DePrince (born Mabinty Bangura in West Africa in 1995), who was once a

poor, vitiligo-spotted, orphaned child enduring long years of the brutal civil war in Sierra Leone. Her emotional stories and testimonies of suffering for years under the violent attacks by rebels of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) that killed both of her parents, the cruelty of her uncle, and the tyranny of the aunties who ran the orphanage, have elicited sympathy from multiple audiences. Following the wide positive response from multiple audiences and its success in achieving numerous prestigious film awards from 2011 to 2013, Michaela became a household name in America, and she gave multiple interviews for popular teenage magazines, newspapers, TV programs, and online platforms as a young advocate on the issues of human rights, war, and trauma. In addition, she also received invitations to perform and tour with two notable ballet companies in South Africa in 2012.

In 2014 Michaela turned to life writing with the publication of her primary memoir in America, *Taking Flight: From War Orphan to Star Ballerina*, which was co-written by Michaela's adoptive mother, Elaine DePrince. The book was published under a reworked title, *Hope in a Ballet Shoe: Orphaned by War, Saved by Ballet: An Extraordinary True Story* (DePrince *Hope*) for United Kingdom readers later in 2014. The children's storybook version, *Ballerina Dreams: From Orphan to Dancer* (published in 2014, illustrated by Frank Morrison), was also issued with a slightly reinvented title and different illustrator, *Ballerina Dreams: A True Story* (published in 2017, illustrated by Ella Okstad) for young British readers. As part of the continued support of her widely acclaimed life narratives, Michaela was also invited as a speaker to share her story at TEDxAmsterdam 2014 ("From 'Devil's'"), which has become like a compulsory standard to rising public figures and activists in the digital age to deliver their messages to what Gillian Whitlock calls as "international inquiries" and "official or quasi-official tribunals" (*Soft Weapons* 75).

The phenomenon of public figures and activists who pen life narrative texts as well as having plenty of life narrative projects crafted for them has become increasingly

commonplace. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in *Reading Autobiography* elaborate that life narrators, like Michaela and her adoptive mother, generally use personal memories as their “primary archival source” such as “letters, journals, photographs, conversations” as well as their knowledge of a historical moment “to support, supplement, or offer commentary on their idiosyncratic acts of remembering” in creating their first-person autobiographical texts (6). Smith and Watson emphasize that:

In autobiographical narratives, imaginative acts of remembering always intersect with such rhetorical acts as assertion, justification, judgement, conviction, and interrogation. That is, life narrators address readers whom they want to persuade of their version of experience. (*Reading Autobiography* 6)

Correspondingly, Philippe Lejeune in “The Autobiographical Pact” explains that the relationship between author and reader in autobiographical writing as a contract: “What defines autobiography for the one who is reading is above all a contract of identity that is sealed by the proper name. And this is true also for the one who is writing the text” (19). Lejeune states how the aspects of “vital statistics” of the author, like date, place of birth and education, have to be identical to those of the narrator, as well as an implied contract or an autobiographical pact is made between author and publisher guaranteeing the validity of the signature (21). This is where the notions of authorship or authorial agency, which primarily shape a life narrator’s self-representation, come to the fore. Smith and Watson elucidate that:

When we recognize the person who claims authorship of the narrative as the protagonist or central figure in the narrative—that is, we believe them to be the same person—we read the text written by the author to whom it refers as reflexive or autobiographical. (*Reading Autobiography* 8)

By situating the autobiographical pact, scholars can read differently, understanding that life narratives have truth claims that are somehow comprised in fictional forms resembling the novel.

Specifically in the case of Michaela DePrince, she openly claims in interviews that she dislikes writing and only produced “little snippets—random thoughts, memories, feelings” that were neither sent nor arranged in a particular order for her mother to organize during her memoir writing process (DePrince, *Taking Flight* 28). In another joint interview, Elaine DePrince has claimed that “Michaela is Mende by tribe, so oral tradition is in her blood; almost daily she would telephone from the Netherlands,” thus she had to type and organize Michaela’s oral stories into a mediated text, making her job even more instrumental than that of Michaela (Brightly).

The process of reading these interview excerpts thoroughly has triggered questions regarding how far the truth in Michaela’s lived experiences has been selected and arranged in her life narrative texts in order to suit the American reading public, particularly since her Jewish Caucasian adoptive mother, who had already published a memoir entitled *Cry Blood Murder* (1997), had a much larger participation in setting the tone of Michaela’s self-representation in the public eye. Given Michaela’s strong aspirations of becoming a professional ballerina or a principal dancer, an image that still “represents a foreign fantasy” to many African American women since they “have been historically alienated from classical art forms in the United States” (Sullivan, “Saving” 1), the goal might be much more political than personal. Nevertheless, given Michaela’s online and offline activism, this combination of two life writing forms is indeed highly relevant to be considered as new diaries for the memoir boom and human rights activism, as does Kylie Cardell in *De@r World: Contemporary Uses of the Diary*. Despite concerns of ethical dilemmas, digital affordances

are particularly key since they give the opportunity for first-person accounts of victimization to be consumed in a more rapid pace and in a much more simply mediated way than conventional media and communication platform channels would do.

Since I am particularly interested in investigating the issues of authorship and self-representation in Michaela DePrince's life narrative texts, I will be addressing Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's *Reading Autobiography* and Kate Douglas and Anna Poletti's *Life Narratives and Youth Culture*, which sheds light on "young people engaging in public modes of self-representation" in contemporary cultures through demonstrating Pierre Bourdieu's literary field theory of youth cultural agency and artistic production (4). Furthermore, due to Michaela's status as a child survivor of war and violence, I will also be applying Gillian Whitlock's *Soft Weapons*. Throughout this article, I will be exploring (1) the testimonial currency of Michaela DePrince's "I" with regards to contexts of race, power and access to tools of representation; (2) the differences between her documentary, her young adult memoirs and her young readers' picture books, as well as her TED Talk; and (3) the future possibilities that her personal and public accounts indicate. Given that Michaela's collaborative archive of life narrative texts is specifically framed with the unique interracial adoptive mother-daughter collaboration, I argue that it has provided her with much more advantages and resources than those who have to make it without the support of a white adoptive parent or guardian. Following these premises, the article aims to show that Michaela and Elaine DePrince's strategy of putting the emotional investment triggered by the "child's eye perspective" (Douglas and Poletti, *Life Narratives* 110) in their multiple life narrative projects is essential to processes of social advocacy, and how the visual effect of still and moving images has the power to influence wide audiences promptly owing to the digital paradigm. By investigating Michaela's collaborative archive, I argue that Michaela's

mediated collaborative archive of life narratives will disclose instrumental knowledge regarding the limits and affordances of contemporary life narrative genres.

First Position (2011)

Michaela, with the support of her adoptive mother Elaine DePrince, first shared the story of her painful childhood of suffering under Sierra Leonean war and violence to the world from her bedroom and ballet studio in New York City while participating in the 2010 Youth America Grand Prix competition and being filmed for American filmmaker Bess Kargman's ballet documentary film, *First Position*. Her story received worldwide attention when the documentary premiered on September 11, 2011 at the Toronto International Film Festival, becoming the nominee of People's Choice Award ("First Position"). Metaphorically, the title of the documentary is symbolic for it represents Michaela's first big step in becoming a professional classical ballet dancer as well as her first step/platform in becoming a well-known public figure and advocate of youth. Prior to its release, Michaela had never been featured on any media or film. In an interview with *St Louis Jewish Light*, Kargman said that the documentary was shot to serve as a counter-narrative to the dominant cultural stereotyping in the ballet world:

The diversity of talent that enters the Youth America Grand Prix competition is very reflective of the dance world in general. I chose dancers because I wanted to also include who they are as human beings, to defy stereotypes. For example, Michaela – not all ballet dancers are white; Joan – not all ballet dancers are rich. ("Ballet Documentary")

First Position indeed unwaveringly strives to present “authentic” stories about the real struggles of Michaela as a young ballet dancer and persuade the audience to respond empathically. Kargman’s desire to include a young female teenager to narrate her traumatic lived experiences in Sierra Leone calls attention to social issues of race, gender and youth that also operate as both the purpose and the theme of the documentary. A documentary film featuring young role models can attract such a global audience and make a lasting impact on youth-oriented subjects since young people are time and again considered as what Katharine Haynes and Thomas M. Tanner categorize as “the most marginalised group” who have to surmount great barriers to make their voices “heard and valued” since they often have the least power (“Empowering” 357). Still, it is common knowledge that a documentary is a planned, organized, and designed creative film piece—implying that it is not free from editing, framing, and directing practices aimed to accentuate its effects for anticipated viewers. Therefore, we can never know precisely the extent of these mediations, but it is worthwhile on postulating the potential consequences of such mediations on our interpretation of the documentary.

Michaela’s role in the documentary film mainly combines two narration styles: screens with the hosted narrator and those with the silent narration. Most of Michaela’s part in the documentary film is shot with the first narration style, such as when she is seen dancing in the studio surrounded by peers and coaches, doing rehearsals, answering interview questions from her bedroom and the studio, sometimes doing voice-overs from her interviews—repeatedly appearing on camera as a host with agency. For the second style, the clips are shot with title screens and are held for approximately 5 to 10 seconds to give the viewers sufficient time to read them. This is evident when the film occasionally shows one brief scene between long ones: for example, it displays Michaela’s childhood photo in Sierra Leone, accompanied with a screen title informing the audience about the twelve-year civil

war that was going on during her younger days. It is essential that Michaela's voice governs her part of the story and that the ones featuring her parents and siblings are shorter and infrequent. While narrating her current life in America, Michaela plainly expresses her gratitude and a slight disbelief regarding her drastic change of luck following adoption: "It's a miracle I'm even here, it's just I can't – I can't believe I'm here, alright. When I was younger, I used to think I was dreaming" (*First Position*). On the one hand, her statement sounds innocently truthful and even full of gratitude to the Western world. However, on the other hand it clearly reinforces the White Saviour Complex similar to that of Malala Yousafzai, due to her being used as a tool of Western propaganda in which "Western journalists and politicians fall over themselves to appease their white-middle class guilt also known as the white man's burden" since neither Malala nor Michaela criticizes the West (Baig). I would also argue that Michaela's persistently distressing portrayal of Sierra Leone confirms what Kate Douglas has identified as the "outdated, shortsighted" media-driven signifiers of Africa that are produced and circulated by Western cultural systems: "the colonial legacies of corruption, famine, and poverty" ("Ethical Dialogues" 274). Michaela's harrowing story strongly resonates with the emergence of African child-soldier narratives in the wake of *KONY 2012* and *Invisible Children*, like Grace Akallo's *Girl Soldier: A Story of Hope for Northern Uganda's Children* (2007) and Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2007) which have contributed to the potentially problematic and mainstream African youth trauma narratives consumed by Western readers.

Yet, despite repeatedly praising the strong moral and financial support of her well-to-do white adoptive parents, Michaela's life in America is nevertheless difficult since she faces both daily and institutional racism and discrimination. In the documentary, Michaela mentions that her path as a classical ballet dancer is full of obstacles since the "ideal" ballet world still rejects the prevalent derogatory images of the African Americans' culture,

temperament, and physical features (Sullivan 3-4; Robinson iv). There are a few accusatory statements in her narration that inform viewers of the dismissive and underestimating treatment she receives from time to time as often being the only black ballet dancer in the room and considered having less potential to become a principal dancer compared to her white peers. In relation to Michaela's case, the voice of young people, particularly those belonging to ethnic minorities and other marginal groups, has been significant in constructing "youth" as "a distinctive speaking position" where young people can "write themselves into culture and history" (Douglas and Poletti 8). In the case of young women, having this position is even more substantial since generally they have to deal more with gender obstacles and expectations than young men. By producing their life narratives, young people can address the gaps that are evident within the processes of decision-making and the recording of political and historical events. Kate Douglas emphasizes that the success of youth-centred blogs, videos, and the likes of them depend much on the fact that young writers are indeed "highly sympathetic and believable" at best ("Malala" 299). However, there are pitfalls to this view. Although young life narrators may succeed in regaining agency and power through producing claims of authenticity and sincerity, on the other hand their use of public strategy might create what Ana Belén Martínez García calls as "larger potentially problematic discourses and geopolitical stakes" ("Bana Alabed" 138). This is what happens in Michaela's case with her documentary in which Sierra Leone's and West Africa's images become synonymous with war, traumatic violence, and child suffering.

Taking Flight and Hope in a Ballet Shoe (2014) and Ballerina Dreams (2014 and 2017)

Following her rise to prominence owing to *First Position*, Michaela slowly came to recognize the importance of writing down and sharing her story as a way to contribute to global humanitarian discourse, notably in the literary tradition of young women narrating war and trauma. In 2014, *Taking Flight* appeared in America while *Hope in a Ballet Shoe* was published in UK. The contents of both memoirs are exactly identical, and they all depict the life stages of Michaela DePrince from childhood to adolescence. Many parts of Michaela's narrative in *Taking Flight* are imbued with traditional West African folklore, the military and cultural histories of Sierra Leone, family life and sisterhood in America, and her trajectory of becoming a professional ballerina. The arrangement of the details of family support help Michaela forge a progressive tonality to her narrative style. I will begin this section by analyzing *Taking Flight* due to its stronger popularity in the US, where Michaela used to live with her adoptive family. Following that point, I will turn to the storybook version, *Ballerina Dreams*.

Taking Flight

Kate Douglas and Anna Poletti have elucidated the paradoxes of youth voices in times of conflict and struggle in the public discourse (67-70). They point out that despite the suffering child's image as a universal passive subject, both children and young people have the capability to reclaim agency through actively taking the advocating role for themselves. Especially within the contexts of children and youth of ethnic background, postcolonial scholars have also noted that the act of integrating recurrent themes, canonical genres, digressive strategies from Western discourse may even be an intended attempt to retaliate on the side of advocates from the Global South (Moore-Gilbert). This can be even more relevant since, according to Douglas in *Contesting Childhood*, childhood experiences and histories have continued to become prominent subjects in the biggest present-day global market of memoir boom, although their identities may be tools for a socio-political agenda (12-13).

Kate Douglas investigates the collaborative archive of life narratives written by and produced about Pakistani female education activist Malala Yousafzai, and concludes that through them, Malala has managed to validate her speaking position as a highly significant one to influence young people everywhere and a nation's future through making claims to authenticity after surviving the conflict zone ("Malala Yousafzai"). Ana Belén Martínez García discerns Bana Alabed's Twitter account that communicates emotional texts, photos, and videos about war-torn Aleppo. Its visual and verbal forms are actually highly curated and mediated by Bana's mother, Fatemah, making it a collaborative life writing project strategically aimed to a political end ("Bana Alabed"). While Malala's as well as Bana's status and recognition have become targets for lots of criticism given that their public identities have been used as "a tool for political propaganda" by the Western world (Mentzell-Ryder, "Beyond Critique" 175), Michaela's have received less criticism since she has chosen a main career path as a professional ballerina who also raises public awareness of human rights and war as an international activist, with some additional focus on skin pigmentation stereotyping and racial discrimination in the ballet world, thus making Michaela's public persona as a political agent to be somewhat low key compared to Malala's and Bana's. Still, I argue that Michaela's case holds a closely similar trope to that of her better-known comrade-in-arms.

It is interesting to contemplate the degree of Michaela's portion of perspective in the memoir, since Elaine has used Michaela's old journals as reference and conducted some private interview with her to recall the details of her childhood, as well as with other strategies to assemble the story pieces together. In one particular interview, Elaine DePrince explains how she collaborated with her adopted daughter to finish the memoir project:

Michaela and I took much of what we included in *Taking Flight* from those interviews and journals. Knowing how busy she was, I gathered her additional memories about ballet, friends, teachers, competitions, dreams, philosophies and

feelings in the form of snippets. These were like pieces of a large unfinished jigsaw puzzle. She would email them to me, and I'd organize them until the puzzle was completed.

As a co-author, Elaine DePrince has assisted Michaela every step of the way, from the moment she adopted Michaela and her best friend from the orphanage, Mabinty Suma (later renamed as Mia DePrince), to the process of writing down her lived experiences as a suffering child in Sierra Leone and a blooming young woman in the United States. Elaine's presence as a collaborator in the memoir is vital and highly strategic: she is a white, middle-class woman who graduated from Rutgers University, once worked as a special education teacher, and now works as an author and raises six West African adopted children (including Michaela). Before adopting girls from West Africa, Elaine DePrince had already established her reputation as an author by writing the notable 1997 memoir *Cry Blood Murder*, that conveys Elaine DePrince's devastating past experiences of losing her sons to HIV/AIDS as a result of tainted blood transfusions (Brightly).

Elaine, as a white American Jewish woman who is educated, intelligent, empathetic, and supportive to the fate of African young girls, is the most suitable connecting agent for the memoir, specifically in linking the narrative with the mainstream American readership and circulation and conforming with the expectations and the nuances of the rising global phenomena of youth memoir and self-portraiture. For an example, Elaine's decision to include Michaela's acts of generosity, such as donating thousands of canned food to a local food shelf, is instrumental since they ground Michaela's self-representation in the ideal image of American generosity and the Western upbringing, thus aligning them with the primary expectations of Western auto/biographical contexts. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva in *Racism without Racists* has noted that despite being closely related to and responsible for their children of colour, white transracially adoptive parents present their adoptees with a history

of racial privilege that is grounded in “White habitus,” a racialized social system created of both residential and psychological segregation that “conditions and creates whites’ racial tastes, perceptions, feelings and emotions, and their views on racial matters” (104). Although many white adoptive parents have actively articulated race-consciousness and understandings into their family lives, somehow this White habitus still tends to maximize in-group interactions but minimize those with people of colour, thus leaving White individuals ill-informed about the lived experiences of minority groups and susceptible to existing stereotypes and generalizations for race-based information (Bonilla-Silva, Goar, and Embrick). The pattern of “colourblindness” among American Whites continues to exist and leaves transracial adoptees struggling with their racial and ethnic identity—as their adoptive parents have little clue to prepare them for their marginalized realities ahead—despite the emerging “race consciousness” in family life (Goar, Davis and Manago 339).

Perhaps this is why the strongest traits from Michaela’s narration are those of sadness and hopelessness regarding the discrimination and stereotyping she has been enduring in the ballet world of America, which she tries to fight every day. As Michaela asserts her agency and authority, *Taking Flight* consistently depicts how the world and its events seem before the eyes of a girl-child, what Douglas and Poletti call the “innocent child figure” (*Life* 68) in order to incite empathy “for the child and secondly for the cause” (69). It is indeed highly convenient for Michaela to have entrusted her Caucasian adoptive mother—already a published writer—to solicit, package and mediate her stories as a “soft weapon” (Whitlock 3), so that Michaela will be quite easily accepted and assimilated into the mainstream American culture, eventually gaining her agency and access to the white-dominated ballet world. Had Michaela written her memoir by herself, she might not have been able to gain massive recognition and be important enough to receive the invitation to join the Dutch National Ballet, a classical ballet company, as a soloist. Kate Douglas and Anna Poletti in

Life Narratives and Youth Culture have tried to address the root of such concerns by explaining that while published memoirs and other forms of life narrative texts have become “a conducive space for marginal voices and perspectives” that can “negotiate identity politics” in the global public sphere (158), the genre of the first person confessional youth is still considered a “risky business” since it might harm or haunt one’s personal life and reputation several decades later (34). Of course, this risk must have been carefully considered by both Michaela and Elaine before finally choosing to undertake the work in creating Michaela’s coherent self-representation in the public eye. Hence, it might also be one of Michaela’s primary reasons to entrust her much more experienced mother to solicit her stories to create the memoirs.

Douglas and Poletti have also connected youth life writing and Bourdieu’s concept of literary field in *The Rules of Art* since the theory explains that young writers seeking publication are the ones who “act in relation to the pre-existing and dynamic values that shape the literary field, which Bourdieu demonstrates has its own logics, discourses and values that sit in relation to the broader field of power” (36). This occurs when young people get involved with the struggle for the authority of literary legitimacy, which is “the monopoly of power to say who is authorised to call himself a writer ... or even to say who is a writer and who has the authority to say who is a writer” (Bourdieu, *The Rules* 224). Young people, in fact, have to “align themselves with the position of youth” (Douglas and Poletti, *Life Narratives* 40) since youth can significantly change the distribution of power and values in the field (Bourdieu, *The Rules* 240). In Michaela’s case, the legitimacy she seeks the most comes from the ones who have the authority to determine who can become a principal dancer. With the general ballet world still strongly rooted in the White habitus, Michaela has to demonstrate extreme but at the same time barely noticeable strategies by collaborating with her American adoptive mother to write herself into the race and power framework.

The process of creating and forming *Taking Flight* has unearthed the deep-rooted expectations of the autobiography/memoir genre, which is a text that comes forth from social, historical, political and cultural contexts that in turn enable the text to make strong connections with the surrounding nuances, while at the same time facilitating it to extend the boundaries of life narrative genre. Amplifying the limits of life narrative here involves revealing the ways of how certain influences and mediations can have a significant impact on the memoir production. For Michaela's case, these strategies are clearly deployed as her memoir is heavily influenced by the cultural, historical and political events that occurred in Sierra Leone and then the social and cultural systems that run within the American daily life and ballet institutions. Kate Douglas states that cultural contexts primarily serve as "a foundation for examining a sample of autobiographies of childhood written during the 1990s and early 2000s" (*Contesting Childhood* 13). As readers gain deeper and further insight into the memoir, they slowly come to acknowledge the importance of composing memoirs with the support of existing knowledge and discourse. Indeed, with the publication of Michaela's memoir, her adoptive sisters may also gain advantage from their role and exposure in bringing Michaela's life story text together, as well as dark-skinned girls who aspire to become professional ballet dancers anywhere. There is a sufficient sense of balance within the memoir as Michaela, with the help of her mother, attentively accentuates her agency as both a writer and an advocate, while at the same time displaying her mediation process in the narrative. Just as Michaela asserts her own authority in the text, we see her becoming more focused on making her memoir a work of resistance, which is resistance to racism, especially the institutional racism in the ballet world. Moreover, by taking active participation in media exposure and coverage, which in turn help build what Meg Jensen calls as the "collective autobiographical projects" (18) or the collaborative archive of life narrative texts, provide her with powerful autonomy to reach out to intended audiences.

Ballerina Dreams

In the same year as the publication of *Taking Flight*, 2014, the American Young Readers' Edition of the memoir appeared with a different title, *Ballerina Dreams: From Orphan to Dancer* (published by Random House). Then in 2017, another version emerged with a slightly reworked title, *Ballerina Dreams: A True Story*, published in the United Kingdom by Faber & Faber. The two abridged editions of her memoir were rewritten by both Michaela and Elaine DePrince, with Frank Morrison as the illustrator for the American edition, and Ella Okstad as the illustrator of the British edition. The contents of both books are almost identical—they are much shorter compared to the primary memoir and are more oriented towards Michaela's story of actualizing her lifelong dream of becoming a professional ballerina. Few cultural contexts are explained in the picture books, and their narrative voice portrays "the innocent child figure" who is generally seen as "a passive victim in need of adult intervention in times of war and conflict" (Douglas and Poletti 68), which is clearly shown through the description of Michaela's American adoptive parents' rescuing her and her sister Mia from the brutal war in Sierra Leone.

Both versions of *Ballerina Dreams* place more emphasis more on the colourful illustrations representing Michaela's simplified life story so that the book "obscures the real-world difficulties DePrince encountered" (Heinecken 311). They imply that her career path as a professional ballerina has been smooth sailing instead of revealing that she was forced to join Dance Theatre of Harlem (DTH)—which is "predominantly ethnic" and not a classical company—like many other dark-skinned ballerinas (*Taking Flight* 233). Although Michaela eventually manages to find a job at a classical ballet company, the Dutch National Ballet, it is noteworthy to point out that as of 2019, she had still not found a position in an American classical ballet company. For instance, the American version of *Ballerina Dreams* only mentions about the racial marginalization Michaela receives in ballet with two short

sentences without disclosing the details of the cultural contexts: “There are few professional black ballerinas. Many people have never seen a black ballerina” (34). The book also does not talk about the ugly truth of mass murder, physical torture and child abuse that occurred during the long years of Sierra Leonean civil war, which all happened directly to Michaela. Indeed, Heinecken further suggests that the book is more like a fairy tale, “a real-life Horatio-Alger story” that celebrates America “as a land of bounty” (311) where Michaela and Mia “had food, warm clothes, and lots of love” (*Ballerina Dreams* 21). *Ballerina Dreams* implies “an ideology of colorblindness,” turning a blind eye to the structural prejudice and inequalities projected to black people and ignoring “the history of ballet as a white art form” (Heinecken 311). The same goes for the British version of *Ballerina Dreams*. While putting aside the cultural, social and political contexts of Michaela’s real-life story might seem “good” and less disturbing to young children, the act of simplifying or ““dumbing down” of knowledge” might “in turn, potentially insulting to young readers” (Douglas 305-306).

As readers, we cannot know for certain about the degree of Michaela’s self-effacing and central authorial role in creating the second autobiographical text, since it was also written by the assistance of Elaine DePrince, her American adoptive mother. There might be what Kate Douglas and Anna Poletti identify as “a blended authorial position” (222) in *Ballerina Dreams* because of the co-authorship with Elaine like in *Taking Flight*, but the extent of this remains unknown. This serves as another “layering of knowledge” (Douglas 305) that complicates critics and scholars’ understanding of her authorship and self-representation in all of her autobiographical projects in the past, present and future. In this way, the creation of both storybooks act as a contributing element to the nuance of Michaela’s collaborative archive of life narrative texts. Moreover, through the different versions of her life writing text, scholars and critics can have an outlook of the consistency and the degree of truth in Michaela’s life narrative projects because they are recreated again

and again and aimed at varied audiences. The act of reproducing autobiographical texts allows the recently published ones to refer and correspond to the previous ones in a critical way.

From ‘Devil’s Child’ to Star Ballerina (2014)

On 28 November 2014, Michaela DePrince’s TEDx talk, “From ‘Devil’s Child’ to Star Ballerina,” shot in Amsterdam of that same year, was uploaded to YouTube, gaining 291,631 total views to date¹. Similar to her preceding life narrative projects, Michaela narrates her war experiences in Sierra Leone and current life in America from the perspective of an ordinary girl and victim. The main reason why global audiences were interested in watching her TED talk may lie in the way Michaela delivers her first-hand testimonial account of how she suffered greatly from a very young age but has managed to triumph and make her dream of becoming a professional ballerina come true. Although Michaela has appeared and participated in numerous TV interviews and online talks such as at HARDtalk by BBC in 2017, which uploaded to YouTube on 19 May 2017 with around 50,973 views (“Michaela DePrince”) and at Forward Thinking Leadership in 2018, which also uploaded to YouTube on 11 October 2019 and with 4,288 views (“Michaela DePrince”), I have chosen to focus on her TEDx talk because, from my observation, the TED talk has been the most robust and consistent online platform to be used by advocates worldwide so far despite it still being “an understudied form of life writing” (Martínez García 488). Also, from my own investigation as a regular viewer of TED talk series, many world-famous figures in the twenty first century—singers, actors, motivational speakers, teachers, activists, researchers, first ladies, artists, directors, TV producers, writers, war victims, models—generally have delivered at

least one “mandatory” TED talk in their lifetime. In her article that analyzes two TED talks of two North Korean young female defectors, memoir and autobiography scholar Ana Belén Martínez García acknowledges that the key to TED talks’ popularity comes from its “peculiar format” (487), which is “prepared offline but transmitted online” (498). Each of them is presented with condensed information “in just over 15 to 20 minutes” that is conducive for life narrators and activists to deliver their “human rights advocacy campaigns” (487). This statement is also strengthened by the fact that with the rising “acts of self-representation”, the digital age has provided the world with “a wealth of resources” that includes “remote access to information, immediacy and global reach” (487). Indeed, in the global rise of Web 2.0, Kay Schaeffer and Sidonie Smith has noted that there has been a shift from what they mention as “I-witnessing” to “e-witnessing,” where the figures representing their stories join together to form an assemblage of voices, visual and verbal texts that makes the testimony to be decentralised instead of constructing it as a singular voice representing a collective social form (“E-witnessing” 228).

In her TEDx talk video, Michaela—dressed in an LBD (little black dress) with her long hair put in a high ballet bun—appears composed, serious and dignified. Her solemn expression and attitude throughout the online narrative, occasionally with teary-eyed remarks, displays an almost identical version of herself to the ones she created in her appearance in the documentary, memoirs, and interviews, thus implying a calm, sincere, convincing and reliable narrator. Michaela opens her narrative with some introductory statements that first refer to her fairy-tale like storytelling style used in her preceding memoirs, storybooks and interviews, and then interestingly deny its “magical fairy tale” media packaging by providing an opposing verification:

My name is Michaela DePrince. When I first started to write my speech, I thought, maybe, I could give it a fairy tale kind of twist. But only because most people tell me

that my life is a fairy tale. But I have to say I strongly disagree. Yes, I've got what I've always dreamed of, but I have to fight for it. ("From 'Devil's")

Michaela's strategy of using a denial as her opening speech to her seemingly miraculous, smooth-sailing life constructed by the mainstream media resonates what Smith and Watson recognise as the "ethic of verification," in which readers nowadays are seeking to perceive testimony in a distinct light, preferring more towards testimony's ethical potentials rather than its "authenticity" ("Witness"). Correspondingly, since her TEDx talk was released in the same year of the publication of her memoirs and American picture book, Michaela can still narrate her life story through the child's perspective (she was 19 at the time) using common language and ordinary means of expression, serving her purpose to be regarded as an ordinary girl, a victim of injustice who is worthy to be heard. Michaela's child image displayed in her TED talk is a powerful tool and, according to Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown in *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*, a key potential to "mobilize empathy" that comes from the "ethical response" born out of "emotions" (2). Michaela is able to construct "potent ethical claims" on the intended audiences by deploying what Martínez García identify as "the strategic wielding of emotions" ("TED Talks" 492), particularly by stressing on the beginning of her life—the details of the abuse she received from her paternal uncle and from the favourite-playing aunties at the orphanage because of her vitiligo-spotted skin, and then the imperfections of her life in America, such as the sudden loss of her adoptive brother Teddy, which greatly affected her emotionally.

However, Michaela interestingly says nothing about the discrimination and stereotyping she once received from the ballet world and only restates that she is "different" and that despite standing out from the crowd, she advises young people to "aspire to dream" and "dare to push boundaries" ("From 'Devil's"). Viewers might get their answer

immediately since Michaela's final remarks are followed by a snippet of her performance with the Dutch National Opera & Ballet, where she dances as a soloist with many of her peer dancers watching from the background. Obviously, Michaela's self-representation and appeal for social justice through her TED talk have been shaped by the objectives of the bigger organizations that formerly helped her achieve her purposes and the field that she has long intended to join. Michaela's discourse, most of the time demanding humanitarian relief and equality, is somehow complex and heavily influenced by the White habitus that governs the frameworks of authorship and self-representation, making it not that easy to assess. Yet, Michaela would neither be the first nor the last advocate to display a full collection of rather incongruous emotional accounts, striving to weave flawed human narratives that are approachable from any angle.

Conclusion

Interpreting Michaela's synchronous but slightly different life narrative projects is challenging for several reasons. First, her collaborative archive triggers questions of authorship, as her documentary and memoirs prove to be highly mediated by her American adoptive mother. Perhaps because of Michaela's apparently apolitical status as a dancer or an entertainer, which poses less "danger" than that of a professional human rights activist, few scholars have verified the extent of the truth and the proportion of her authentic voice within her life narrative. Smith and Watson have observed that issues of authenticity and reliability will continue to emerge within the domain of testimonial accounts of human rights narratives ("Witness"). Michaela DePrince's multimodal approach to the global frameworks of humanitarian discourse is reliant on stimulating benevolence and empathy. This has also forged a discourse of violent contrasts: her story is in some way consistent with the idyllic notions of world peace and childhood innocence, but at the same time the intricate process by

which her identity is mediated can be criticized as shaped white privilege as well as colourblindness. This complex position gives her both online and offline means of delivering her messages and calling for humanitarian response, representing herself as not only an American teen but also the voice of Sierra Leone. Through creating both the traditional (with her participation in the documentary, her role in producing the memoirs and picture books) and digital (the TED talk and other online TV talks and interviews) forms of advocacy, Michaela can weave the testimonial or emotional currency particularly relevant to cases of youth. Michaela's collaborative archive of life narrative texts serves as a rhetorical weapon that gains support and reaches out to larger audiences. Leigh Gilmore in *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say about Their Lives* stresses that girls' testimonial advocacy is always susceptible to the problematic stigma that represents "a form of witness tainting that can be mobilized as a ready-made judgement against any particular text" (83).

Michaela's narrating "I" in all of her life narrative projects is not only Michaela's but also a co-manufactured "I" with her adoptive mother Elaine, as is openly recognised in many interviews. Thus, questions of authorship emerge as people can see how keen Michaela is in altering her life narrative vignette between personal and political standpoints as she inscribes herself to the larger references of history and culture, strongly resonating with the emergent era of human rights advocacy. As Michaela has finally been accepted to dance with a classical ballet company in the Netherlands, her most recent public appearances in international media and social media platforms have assumed a solid, singular trope through representing herself as a confident voice who has managed to establish an advocating standpoint that employs the emotional currency and cultural frameworks of traumatised girlhood.

Furthermore, since each of these life narrative projects has displayed Michaela's private life becoming public, there exist ethical considerations brimming with what Smith

and Watson acknowledge in *Life Writing in the Long Run* as “the potential—and the pitfalls—of vibrant self-presentations” (xlvii). These mentioned possible areas of vulnerability include the “risky” commerciality of youth life writing (Douglas and Poletti, *Life* 44) and the failure of addressing social values in an ethical way, thus triggering “casual and passive spectatorship” to perceive stories of trauma and violence as “mere voyeurism” (Whitlock 155). In addition to all of these possible pitfalls, it is common knowledge that by gaining such growing popularity from their online and offline activities, figures like Michaela are becoming easy targets to harsh criticisms and judgements that might haunt her personal life and reputation in the future. By assembling and combining these online and offline life narrative pieces to read, the collective authorship of Michaela’s traditional and digital forms of life narrative texts is still heavily rooted in the White habitus or White privilege. Ultimately, these point to the power and the significance of bigger organizations and institutions (for instance, classical ballet companies and media and publishing companies) in designing and determining the focus of each of Michaela’s life writing texts, so that they constitute an acceptable self-representation (associated with mainstream black trauma narratives) that can join the traditional life writing testimony and the ever-growing contemporary forms of advocacy in the Western world, in both traditional and digital venues.

Note

1. This particular views data was last updated on 4 October 2019.

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