I Am Accused of Tending to the Past

i am accused of tending to the past
as if i made it,
as if i sculpted it
with my own hands. i did not
this past was waiting for me
when i came,
a monstrous unnamed baby,
and i with my mother's itch
took it to breast
and named it
History.
she is more human now,
learning languages everyday,
remembering faces, names and dates.
when she is strong enough to travel
on her own, beware, she will.

Lucille Clifton

Uncomfortable Rhetorics: The Intersections of Black Womanhood in Autobiographical Narratives

The speaker of Lucille Clifton's poem has been accused of "tending to the past"—of somehow contributing to the production of history, but that she also claims agency over a responsibility she did not ask for. It becomes "monstrous" in that the speaker has the undertaking of weaving together the different fabrics of history. In my research project, I too am tending to the past because I am reclaiming authority over enslaved Black women's autobiographical narratives, which have been obscured and erased from history. I am confronting unpleasant aspects of history in texts where slavery, sexual and systemic violence, and disenfranchisement intersect. I will allow the narratives of enslaved and free Black women to assert their agency by applying post-colonial theory, African-American Literary theory, and Black feminist theory to better understand the rhetorical strategies they use in discussing Black women's oppression. Centering their texts will aid in preserving Black women's visibility, but also nurturing Black women's written history too.

The topic of slavery in American culture is a sore one and even more so the romanticization of sexual violence inflicted on enslaved Black women by white slave owners. It was not uncommon for a white slave owner to have a penchant for a specific enslaved Black woman, especially if he wanted to sexually exploit her. However, this sexual exploitation has translated in American literature, history, and cultural lore as romance, so much so that these women were coined mistresses. For example, even in her attempt to re-envision history and reveal the truth about the relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, a mixed-race woman who he kept enslaved, author Annette Gordon-Reed refers to Sally Hemings as Jefferson's mistress thirty-seven times. Additionally, the late civil rights leader Julian Bond's

obituary printed in the *New York Times* in 2015 refers to his great-grandmother as "the slave mistress of a Kentucky farmer." Clearly, the false assumption that enslaved black women could be—and would choose to be—mistresses to their white, male owners in a system that reduced their value as human beings to their physical bodies and labor, continues to be pervasive in our culture. In truth, enslaved Black women lacked sexual agency and autonomy to make that choice.

However, the narratives of enslaved Black women make their lack of sexual agency and autonomy clear. Yet because these women faced such precarious political positioning during and after legalized slavery, they needed to present their cases to various audiences who might be powerful allies in their fight for humane treatment. These audiences, including male editors, northern abolitionists, and white women in general, had competing values and motives. What is interesting, then, is the rhetorical strategies that these enslaved Black women used to describe their experiences with slavery, especially with the sexual violence and exploitation that made consensual relationships impossible. By analyzing autobiographical narratives such as Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Mary Prince's *The History of Mary Prince,* and neo-slave narratives like Essie Mae Washington-Williams' *Dear Senator* and Nina Simone's "Four Women," it becomes clear that silence, intersectional positioning, and reported speech were important rhetorical moves used by Black women to discuss sexual violence and trauma for these varied audiences. My argument is significant because it humanizes these women as it makes clear that they did not have sexual autonomy in these relationships. It is also significant because it extends the scholarship available on autobiographical narratives by Black women. Finally, this project has implications for the ways in which these autobiographical narratives are read, taught, and assessed.

It is important to look at *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, The History of Mary Prince,* "Four Women," and *Dear Senator* because they provide the colonial and post-colonial responses of one another with Black womanhood, sexuality, and cultural identities. The song "Four Women" and *Dear Senator* come full circle when examining works by Black women two generations removed from slavery who also felt the sting of socio-political changes like Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement, and integration.

Also it is important to recognize the language we use towards enslaved Black women, because when we refer to them as mistresses, paramours, concubines, or lovers of white men, we imply they had the sexual agency to engage in relationships of their choosing with white men, which they did not. This takes the responsibility off the white systemic violence and their ownership over Black women's bodies and sexuality. A mistress is a woman who chooses to engage in an extramarital sexual relationship with a man. A paramour is an illicit or secret lover, which enslaved Black women were not. A white man who secretly or overtly raped an enslaved Black woman who he had a penchant for was no lover, because enslaved women could not resist advances. It is time to stop romanticizing violent interracial sexual contact as romance and to stop letting the oppressor's version of the story be accepted as truth.

March 26, 1815

My name is Victory. I was born on the third of September of seventeen hundred and ninety-three in Virginia on a tobacco plantation. Mother is Negro like me, but my Father is Master Calhoun. I can't call him Father like my white sister and brother. Before I was sent to live in the big house, I asked Mother who my Father was. She slapped me so hard I can still feel it to this day and told me to never call him that. He was always to be called Master Calhoun and always smelled of tobacco.

May 27, 1815

Lately Chloe's been asking me if I'm a good nigger. Anytime Master bought new slaves, sold old ones in town, or whipped a runaway, Chloe made sure I knew what could happen to me. Then she would say Master wouldn't sell me, because she would need a slave for when she got married and moved out. Her children would also need slaves for themselves. "I see the way those other house niggers look at you, Victory. You could give me some strong slaves." With a bowed head, I said, "Yes, ma'am" but thought, That's what your cousins said to me. The revolting smell of tobacco lingered.

May 11, 1815

Some pains are so horrible that not even God can heal you nor your eyes unsee them. Yesterday one of the field hands tried to escape. He got as far as the James River, about five miles off the plantation. When the overseer and other slavers caught up with him, Master Calhoun wanted us all to learn a lesson. Chloe practically dragged me outside, and with the darkest slaves on one side and the lightest on the other, Master Calhoun stripped the man naked and tied him to a tree. He swung the cat o' nine tails at the naked man's back until his Black flesh bled, but the man didn't wince. Neither did Chloe. The tears from my eyes burned through my yellow skin and tasted spicy like the breath of Missus' nephews and like the air around me.

Historically Situating Enslaved Black Women

Because this project looks specifically at the autobiographical narratives of enslaved Black women or that capture the experience of enslavement, it is important to situate Black women's enslavement historically. One foundational aspect of enslavement was the economic system in place. During colonial times in America, white colonists reversed the old Roman law partus sequitur ventrum, or the hereditary slave law, to argue that children born to enslaved Black mothers would retain their mother's slave status. This was the law adopted into British culture with the children usually following the status of their father regardless of the status of their mother. In early English colonial laws in Virginia, Black people were the equivalent of indentured servants and could own land. This posed a threat to colonial elites in several ways, because there was only so much land that could be given to free people, and because indentured servants could escape. Historian David Blight suggests that the chaos inherent in the indentured servant system helped solidify the value of slavery to southerners:

> This disorder that the indentured servant system had created made racial slavery to southern slaveholders much more attractive, because what were black slaves now? Well, they were a permanent dependent labor force, who could be defined as a people set apart. They were racially set apart. They were outsiders. They were strangers and in many ways throughout the world, slavery has taken root, especially where people are considered outsiders and can be put in a permanent status of slavery. (Blight)

To correct the chaos and give order to the newly formed slave society, white colonists correlated slavery with skin color, particularly with Blackness, and made it multigenerational. Additionally, to curtail the aspect of freedom between Black and whites, white colonists adopted the hereditary slave law. By writing into law that the children of enslaved Black women would also be slaves,

like their mothers, this gave white men permission to take ownership of Black women's bodies and sexual reproduction.

Beyond the economic system, enslavement was also founded on religious beliefs around women and their bodies. Because colonial religion had deemed all women full of lust and sin, sexual misconduct of white men was seen as the fault of women. According to bell hooks in *Ain't I a Woman?*, this belief shifted in the 19th century with Victorian notions, when white men began viewing white women as virtuous goddesses rather than seductresses. White women were held as the image all women should represent. They represented piety, purity, and virtuousness and were coerced into being sexually chaste to uphold this image, which created a chasm between themselves and Black women because of the patriarchal notions of womanhood and sexuality that permeated slave society. White men were in their rightful bounds both legally and socially to sexually manipulate and exploit Black women's bodies. Religion rationalized and the tone of their perceptions of women's bodies and worth, especially in early colonial days. hooks asserts that, "In fundamentalist Christian teaching woman was portrayed as an evil temptress, the bringer of sin into the world. Sexual lust originated with her and men were merely victims of her wanton power" (48-49). This notion of women's sexuality tied to religion shifted for white women in the 19th century. Instead of them being seen as sinful, they were then seen as worldly (50). Even more so, since their value as women ranked higher on the social ladder, hooks states, "White women held black slave women responsible for rape because they had been socialized by 19th century sexual morality to regard woman as sexual temptress," (58). White women subscribing to white men's views of Black women's sexuality made them an enemy. Despite them sharing womanhood in common, they were protected by whiteness.

The Mystery of Ruby McCollum

Lore has it that
Ruby was fed up with Dr. Adams
that she paced the dark
halls of her home
that she had a long, sleepless night
that she decided to kill him.

We don't know that -

if, in fact, Ruby had labored over
a murder plan
if, in fact, she'd slept soundly
if, in fact, she'd had an affair.

But we do know that -

she left her children in the car
that she went into the patient room
that four shots rang from his office.

This we do know
in fact.

When Your Body Is Not Your Own

Legalized sexual exploitation and violence against enslaved Black women at the hands of white men is interwoven with American history, and has been upheld as a practice through legal, social, and medical practices. For instance, one particular case, *The State of Missouri vs. Celia*, describes the legal circumstances of Celia, a slave, who was purchased by Robert Newsom in 1850 when she was 14-years old. Historian Douglas O. Linder states, "Shortly after returning with Celia to his farm, Newsom raped her. For female slaves, rape was an 'ever present threat' and far too often, a reality." Linder goes on to share that Celia would be repeatedly raped over the next five years, which would result in her bearing a child by Newsom. During this period, Celia did have a consensual sexual relationship with an enslaved man named George. Celia's pregnancy by Newsom had caused problems between them, and according to Linder, George stated to Celia "he would have nothing more to do with her if she did not quit the old man." Even though she was being sexually exploited and could not control it, she was also blamed for the abuse she suffered. Celia did seek the help of Newsom's daughters for their father to "quit forcing her while she was sick." Although Linder suggests there is not evidence of whether his daughters intervened, there is evidence that the rapes continued. Celia even pleaded for the sexual assaults to stop during her pregnancy, but Newsom continued asserting his sexual dominance over her.

However, this case also provides evidence of the efforts enslaved Black women took to end their sexual violence and exploitation, as Celia fought back against Newsom one night when he visited her with intent to rape her. She rendered him unconscious with a blow from a stick to his head. She repeated this until he was dead, and she later burned his body. Celia later confessed to killing Newsom for sexually abusing her, but it did not matter. Since Newsom was Celia's

owner, she was found guilty of murder and subsequently hanged for killing her master. A slave could be tried and sentenced for a crime, but a slave master, regardless of his errant treatment towards slaves, could not. For the most part, slave laws dictated that a slave master could treat or punish his slaves the way he saw fit. He could murder, maim, whip, or rape his slaves for sometimes no reason at all and it still be justified. This doctrine was important as it gave slaveholders the power to exercise physical violence over enslaved Black women in ways that left these women with no legal recourse.

A more notorious and widely cited illustration of legalized rape is Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson. Because Jefferson's penchant for Hemings has been well documented and resulted in her bearing four surviving children by him, many historians and scholars have spun their master-slave relationship as a torrid love affair. However, that fiction is wildly opposed to the truth, that Hemings was a mixed-race slave woman and the half-sister of Martha, Jefferson's wife, and was bequeathed to Jefferson, making her legally his property and slave. Just before the outbreak of the French Revolution, Jefferson left his plantation Virginian Monticello plantation and settled in Paris, France along with his teenage daughter Martha. According to Sally Hemings' son, Madison Hemings, Sally Hemings was 14 years old and accompanied Martha around the country as her maid (Hemings). He also mentions his mother was in Paris for about eighteen months. However, during this period from 1787-1789, Madison Hemings notes his mother became, "Mr. Jefferson's concubine, and when he was called back home she was enciente by him." This would put Jefferson in his mid-40s, and Hemings between 14-16 years old. Even though she was legally free in France because slavery was illegal there, which meant American slave laws had no legitimacy. She was still a minor and coerced her into a sexual relationship with Jefferson. The fact that historians and scholars seem to regard Jefferson's behavior as a

lovestruck man rather than a slave-owning rapist who exercised his power and authority over a child is the reason research that delves into these enslaved Black women's experiences continues to be necessary.

Madison further describes how his mother was not ready to go back to the states, because she was a free woman, had learned French, and would be re-enslaved upon setting foot in Virginia. However, Jefferson goaded her into going back to Virginia with lofty promises, one of such being all of her children would receive freedom when they reached 21-years old. Shortly after arriving back to Virginia, Hemings gave birth to her first child by Jefferson. In total, she bore four surviving children - three boys (Madison, Beverly, and Eston) and a girl (Harriet), all of whom remained slaves until adulthood because of their white father's ownership of their mother.

Historians have also assessed Jefferson's behavior, which can be seen in the book *Mongrel Nation* by historian Clarence Walker; he examines the dynamics of interracial sexual contact particularly between whites, Natives, and Blacks that stemmed from colonialism. But his examinations reflect more of an infatuation with interracial sex than actual investigations of relationships between slaves and masters. In Ania Loomba's *Colonialism/Postcolonialism,* she suggests during colonialism that whites sought to differentiate themselves by Othering Natives and Blacks quintessentially emphasizing that those who did not look like them were primitive and lacked refinement (53-54). However, Walker posits Jefferson's pursuit of Hemings as that of a misunderstood lover who could not openly love a Black woman. Walker states, "In Thomas Jefferson's Virginia, white men could not openly acknowledge sleeping with black women. To do so would have resulted in the legal punishment and, perhaps more damaging in the long run, ostracism" (24). Walker's assessment ignores the racist structure of slavery and that Jefferson

was a willing a contributor in the damaging laws that oppressed Black people. He was the president and slave owner, not a victim of the system. Walker further suggests that Hemings "was not the first black bondswoman to have sex with her master" (26). He neglects to tell the reader of Hemings's age, the laws surrounding Black bondswomen, the role of religion, social norms, or reinforce that she was property and could not resist the sexual advances of her master. Walker sexually objectifies a child, while placing no moral responsibility on Jefferson for his egregious conduct.

Other historians have a slightly more ambiguous approach as to how Jefferson's role to Hemings should be defined. In a *New York Times* article called "Monticello Is Done Avoiding Jefferson's Relationship with Sally Hemings," writer Farah Stockman suggests there was more to Jefferson and Hemings than a master-slave relationship. She notes that some historians do not agree with calling Jefferson a rapist or consider his actions as rape. African-American historian Niya Bates states, "There are a lot of people who believe rape is too polarizing a word." This is corroborated with former Monticello historian Lucinda Stanton's assessment with, "The words 'rape' and 'rapist,' what it conjures up is not a nuanced situation. There were other relationships like theirs which were clearly love matches." Stanton implies that slavery was neither malevolent nor violent, and that slave masters were benevolent forces. She believes that because sexual contact took place, particularly over the span of decades, that it was not violent. Her line of thinking is just as clouded as Walker oversexualization of Hemings and reinforces the idea that enslaved Black women made choices to engage in sexual relationships with their masters. It sanitizes the legal sexual coercion, manipulation, and abuse enslaved Black women suffered at the hands of white slave-owning men.

Notably, medical practices at the time blended together the social and the legal aspects of the ownership of Black women's bodies, which provided more legitimacy to white slaveholders claims to enslaved Black women's bodies. Gynecology was initially a woman's area of expertise even with the establishment of European colonies in the New World. It was even considered immoral for men to step into a woman's terrain. According to historian Deirdre Cooper Owens in *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology,* this shift in sexes became popular at the expense of white slave owners to manage the reproductive health of their slaves (17) which was instigated by their need to manage. The field of medical gynecology became masculinized in the American South because white slave owners networked tightly with white doctors to ensure the sexual wellness of Black women. However, this happened without the women's consent.

Medical doctors used Black women's bodies as experiments to treat diseases, illnesses, cures, and other gynecological conditions that were waived for white women. As Historian Elaine Breslaw states, "white doctors were free to perform procedures on black women that would have been socially unacceptable to white women, at the minimum violating the standard of modesty" (27). Since black women did not have the same social value as white women, they were not afforded modesty. Doctors also helped mobilize and reinforce misogynoir—the co-constitutive, anti-Black, and misogynistic racism directed at Black women (Bailey 1). In the same way a botanist might assign different classifications for plants, medical doctors did so for Black women. Owens states that, "Particularly by midcentury, physicians' medical writings offered laypersons and professionals alike foundational texts that modeled how to treat and think about black and white women and their perceived differences based on biology and race" (19). This not only meant that Black women were biologically inferior to white women, but that their

bodies made them subhuman. White medical doctors also relied on travel writings from European historians and explorers to further widen the gap on alleged biological differences between white and Black women. For example, Owens suggests that writing in medical journals correlated "certain diseases, features, and behaviors were endemic to women of African descent, for example, steatopygia (enlarged buttocks), elongated labia, low-hanging breasts, and lasciviousness" (19). They intentionally sexualized Black women's bodies because they did not resemble white women's bodies.

As frightening as the experimental treatments on live bodies were, a crowning declaration of abuse over Black women's bodies was the dissection of body parts. Owens notes that an enslaved Black women named Mary had an infected uterus that was subsequently removed. The white medical staff did not inform Mary of the procedure, which rendered her infertile. She died three months later. Her cancer-ridden uterus was put on display in Philadelphia with the permission from the doctor who had performed the procedure, but not permission from Mary herself. Owens draws this point with, "Even postmortem, some black women seemed unable to escape the gaze and ownership of white men" (Owens 20). Not even in death was she allowed dignity, but further oppression. She had no ownership of her body to begin with, because the laws created by white men dictated that she was human chattel.

Whether discussing Celia or Hemings or enslaved Black women more generally, it is important to recognize their bodies never belonged to them, due to the implications of legal, social, and medical practices at the time. They were not mistresses or concubines, women who had the autonomy to engage in sexual relationships with men of their choosing. They were minors and rape victims and had the same legal standing as a piece of furniture, because they were counted as property, and rape only applied to white women. Enslaved Black women were

also forced to comply with the demands of their white masters in order to stay alive. White colonists, slave traders, and slave masters were more than aware they could misuse tools like religion to oversexualize Black women and paint their violent sexual behaviors as lust. They created laws from hereditary slavery to legalized rape and abuse and medical bondage to cover up racist rhetoric and to stamp their ownership and control over Black bodies while being enabled to lawfully inflict domestic terrorism.

Inequity

Their children
drank
from her breast.
Her children
drank
from separate
fountains.

White Women's Attitude Towards Black Women

Many White women, who were cared for by Black women as girls, were groomed from young ages to devalue Black women from their mothers, fathers, and others around them. In historian Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers *They Were Her Property*, she describes a toddler girl named Lizzie Anna Burwell who had a Black caregiver named Fanny. After having a temper tantrum, Lizzie Anna repeated to her father to "cut Fanny's ears off" and to buy her a new slave (1). The child's father did not find it problematic using violent language and her aunt found it amusing, because it would be preparing her for being a mistress later in life. Jones-Rogers further cites, "Parents also offered their daughters vicarious lessons in how to own and control enslaved people through their own words and deeds" (2). White southern girls, like Lizzie Anna, needed to have that reinforcement of treating Black people as disposable in her environment.

Sometimes white southern girls participated in this brutalization of Black women and caregivers from their mothers and fathers. One such instance Jones-Rogers notes is with James Curry, whose mother had nurtured their master's children. Curry had a conflict with one of the children, a girl, who got pushed to the floor. The child struck Curry's mother and later told her father of the incident. Afterwards, the master "beat her fifteen or twenty times with a hickory rod, and 'then called his daughter and told her to take her satisfaction, and she did beat her until she was satisfied'" (10). Another act of brutalization occurred with Henrietta King, an enslaved young girl responsible for emptying the family's chamber pots. King's mistress left candy out to see if the girl would take it and eventually she did. When her mistress questioned her about it, King denied it. Her mistress began beating her, but King moved too much. The mistress secured King's head under a rocking chair while her daughter "beat her with a cowhide" (11). This helped white southern girls foster methods of compliance with managing their slaves. It did not

matter if white Southern girls were raised alongside Black girls and nurtured by Black women, they were afforded a position of power that enabled them to pattern violent social disciplines from their parents onto Black bodies.

On other occasions, white Southern girls adopted a nonchalant attitude towards Black bodies being brutalized by their fathers and brothers. Jones-Rogers mentions the case of the *State of Georgia vs. Green Martin*, where slave owner Green Martin and his son Godfry beat their slave Alfred to death. Alfred had apparently told Godfry to kiss his derriere (8). As part of his punishment, Alfred was used as a chair and then subsequently beaten, thrown on the floor, and dragged through the yard. Although slave owners could discipline their slaves how they deemed fit, there were laws governing what disciplinary methods were extreme, and a slave owner could be tried in a court of law. It is not known who reported the death of Martin's slaves, but his three daughters, who testified in court, did not intervene in trying to stop the violence from worsening. Mary witnessed her father and brother "choking, kicking, and whipping the boy" (8). Sarah and Catherine witnessed their father abusing Alfred as well. The Martin sisters did not intervene, because such acts of violence were normal in their upbringing, and thus their father and brother's actions did not seem out of line. Even though the case did not involve a Black woman, the attitudes of the Martin sisters' indifference towards violence in their home helped them maintain control over enslaved Black people, but to also remain indifferent towards cruelty regarding Black women.

The livelihood of white women was built on the same oppressive foundations as white men's were. As babies, white girls were assigned or bequeathed their own slaves. They learned violent language from those around them and were encouraged to do so. They learned and participated in violent acts against slaves from their mothers and fathers. They absorbed different

techniques on slave management from their mothers and fathers to better prepare them for managing their lot and plantation. Slave culture taught white Southern girls, who would eventually become white women, to be indifferent towards the suffering and subjugation of Black bodies. They were conditioned to believe they had nothing in common with Black women and that Black women were the problem with white men's sexual philandering. And, in order to be effective mistresses, white women had to know they were in charge and be callous in their actions, and they had to expect deference from Black men and women alike.

Black Women's Autobiographies: An Evolving Genre

The first known autobiographical narrative comes from an enslaved Black woman named Belinda Sutton. She was kidnapped from Africa and learned English, but could not read or write. She, however, relied on her oral tradition to convey to a predominantly white male environment of her origins, of how she arrived in America, and her loyalty to the Royall family who'd owned her. According to the Medford Historical Society, Sutton's 1783 testimony was transcribed in third person by a freeman named Prince Hall. The first few lines of her narrative note that "seventy years have rolled away, since she was on the banks of the Rio de Valta, received her existence" which identifies that she came from Ghana more than seventy years prior. Her narrative also explains that she was twelve years old when she was kidnapped:

> But her affrightened imagination, in its most alarming extension, never represented the distress equal to what she hath since really experienced—for before she had Twelve years enjoyed the fragrance of her native groves, e'er she realized that Europeans placed their happiness in the yellow dust which she carelessly marked with her infant footsteps. (Sutton)

Sutton's account shows the trauma of being kidnapped by European colonists in Africa to North America. As part of her ethos, the details of the groves and the yellow sand connect her directly to Ghana; it also shows the fondness and longing of her homeland and connects the audience with it too. Her voice about Ghana would only come from someone who lived there. In its own way, with "but her affrightened imagination, in its most alarming extension, never represented the distress equal to what she hath since really experienced" reflects that Sutton's narrative cannot be contained to paper. Although it is likely meant to be heard and felt as opposed to read, Sutton's narrative gave way towards preserving oral history.

Although Sutton's narrative is considered the first autobiographical narrative by an enslaved Black woman, other enslaved Black came after her and shared their experiences with slavery and sexual violence and exploitation. The first autobiographical narrative authored by a Black woman is *The History of Mary Prince* by Mary Prince. Prince's autobiography, published in 1831, was written for an English audience who were largely unaware of slavery in the West Indies. Prince was born on the island of Bermuda, but was later transported to Grand Turk Island (modern-day Turks and Caicos), Antigua, and her last stop being England. Thomas Pringle, the editor of *The History of Mary Prince*, states, "The idea of writing Mary Prince's history was first suggested by herself. She wished it to be done, she said, that good people in England might hear from a slave what a slave had felt and suffered" (248). There was a part of Prince that believed by sharing her slave status that it would not only create a deeper awareness of the horrors of slavery, but that her history as a Black woman and humanity mattered.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl is the second autobiography written by a Black woman. Although this was not the first book published regarding the horrors of slavery by a Black person, *Incidents* is one of the most widely used and cited autobiographical narratives

authored by a Black woman. *Incidents* was published in 1859, not only during slavery, but also during the abolitionist movement. In this way, the Black woman's autobiography was used to expose the insidious nature of slavery, and by mass producing such narratives it could bolster support for why it should be abolished. It was not enough for white abolitionists to preach this message, but with irrefutable proof from those who lived it could provide the ammunition and support they needed to aid in ending slavery. According to Katherine Clay Bassard in *Gender and Genre: Black Women's Autobiography and the Ideology and Literacy,* the purpose of Jacobs's narrative looks for a political change and to arouse the senses of women in the North about Black women in the south in bondage (121). Much like with Prince, her narrative sought to reinstill how Black women's voices mattered in an area where Black women's voices were excluded.

I chose Belinda Sutton to analyze because it is important to see how Black women's autobiographical narratives came to fruition by starting with the first one recorded. Although Prince's autobiographical narrative may have been gutted for a Victorian-era English audience, it is also the first known autobiographical narrative in print by an enslaved Black woman. Jacobs's autobiographical narrative provides some of the most explicit accounts of an enslaved Black woman's life while still living in slavery. And Simone's narrative, a neo-slave narrative, provides a deeper insight into how Black women have adopted white society's version of how Black women should be versus what they actually are.

Autobiographies also became a way to mobilize oral history as seen with "The Petition of Belinda Sutton." In *Incidents,* for example, Jacobs notates the comfort and security of her grandmother. Because she lost her mother at a young age, her grandmother took her place. She recalls how "spirited" her grandmother was, and how she had escaped slavery only to be

recaptured and sold back into slavery (86). Jacobs's father, a carpenter and free man, taught her she was human and not just property. Jacobs carries the memories of her loved ones with her and makes sure the audience knows, but does not forget where she comes from either.

In addition to mobilizing history, Jacobs preserves her history in *Incidents* on another powerful level, which is through genealogy. Slavery tore Black families away from each other and destroyed the fabric of their relationships, so it was commonplace for many to not know their family history at all or to remember little of it. But that was not the case for Jacobs, which makes her narrative all the more unique and distinct. Her grandmother was the "daughter of a planter in South Carolina, who at his death, left her mother and his three children free, with money to go to St. Augustine, where they had relatives" (86). She even recalls how her grandmother had five children and provides the reader with the name of her youngest uncle—Benjamin. With her genealogy being in print, it gives her narrative a permanent place in history that cannot be erased.

Other forms of autobiographical narratives have also taken the shape of songs, such as Nina Simone's "Four Women." Simone was a professional jazz songstress and her racially charged song "Four Women" brought about controversy because of the heavy legacy of slavery of Black womanhood at the forefront. The first of the four women, Aunt Sarah, reflects a mammy-like figure developed after slavery; the second is Saffronia, a mixed-race women conceived through slave rape; the third is Sweet Thing is a prostitute, and Peaches represents the first generation of Black women born in a post-slave society. In *The Quadruple Consciousness of Nina Simone*, scholar Malik Gaines quotes Simone's own explanation of her song as a mirror for black women:

> All the song did was to tell what entered the minds of most black women in America when they thought about themselves: their complexions, their hair – straight, kinky,

> natural, which? – and what other women thought of them. Black women didn't know what the hell they wanted because they were defined by things they didn't control, and until they had the confidence to define themselves, they'd be stuck in the same mess forever – that was the point the song made" (258).

Simone's purpose was to subvert the stereotypes of the figures she personified and to provide a better awakening of Black female consciousness. She wrote this song during the Civil Rights Movement of the '60s, when Black politics and cultural identities were front and center. Black people were challenging damaging ideologies stemming from white supremacy such as physical beauty. Simone holds a mirror to Black women to show how they have allowed whites to define them in negative aspects - as angry (Peaches) or overly sexual (Sweet Thing). It serves as a catalyst to be more than the one-dimensional way whites painted them as. And, in Simone's own way, too, despite using fictional personas, she wrote about real Black women who still live in America today.

Not Your Seductress, Not Your Mistress

she was never your seductress
swishing her hips up
and down the halls vying
for your wayward eyes
and stray hands as she
filled the rooms with fresh
linens and sheets

was never your mistress
bent over in the
cellar scanning your
favorite brandy wet
waiting panting in
nothing but a corset

was never your jezebel
when you forced her 13
year old body to sleep
in the bed with you
lest she favored stripes

was never your lover
when you rewarded her
with a hog and new dress
for Christmas after selling
her - *your* blood soaked
baby on the block
for the tenth time

was never your seductress
mistress concubine paramour
lover whore harlot coquette jezebel
your bedwench

you were her master abuser
killer manipulator tormentor
violator trafficker captor offender
her rapist

she was your victim
but not your only one

Rhetorical Choices in Enslaved Black Women's Autobiographical Narratives

Black women's autobiographies have served the purpose of maintaining their history and genealogy, but were also used as tools for the abolitionist movement because they provided personal insights of how insidious it was towards enslaved Black people. I plan on using rhetorical strategies such as ethos, reported speech, and intersectionality, because I will be speaking to the credibility of the narrators.

Building an Intersectional Ethos

Many Black women's rhetorical choices in narratives do not carry a specific blueprint. As an ethos, they sometimes vary based upon aspects like economic and social standings as well as personality or intent. In regards to enslaved Black women's autobiographies, Stover argues that "Each writer's aim was to present a text that represented her voice and the voices of the personae within her narrative, as well as she could recall them" (37). With *Incidents*, Jacobs's narrative speaks from the perspective of a formerly enslaved Black woman. It was written and published during slavery—a time where Black people were not afforded the luxury of education or literacy, let alone able to define their own identities without a white gaze. Stover suggests that literacy played an instrumental role in cementing mobility among Black people noting that, "Learning to read and write the English language provided African Americans with that first taste of freedom, giving them a tool—eventually, a weapon—to counteract their total cultural exclusion from 'American' society by the dominant white controllers of that society," (34). With this tool of inclusion, Jacobs sought to make herself as well as enslaved Black women as a collective visible, but also to appeal to Northerners in a sentimental way. This was sometimes in the form of a question. For example, in one passage, Jacobs states, "In view of these things, why are ye silent, ye free men and women of the north? Why do your tongues falter in the maintenance of the

right?" (106) drawing attention to the hypocrisy and duplicity of Northerners regarding the atrocities slavery. Simone too asks questions, but as a way of drawing attention to the identities she speaks of and ensuring their visibility. Jacobs wants to elicit a response from the readers, and perhaps making them reassess their passivity on the conditions of enslaved Blacks, was not to only turn the cameras on themselves, but to make them question their intent as abolitionists.

Unlike *Incidents, The History of Mary Prince*, and *Dear Senator*, in Simone's "Four Women" she uses four distinct personas based on slave stereotypes in order to make listeners rethink Black women's racial identities in a post-colonial society. Although there is no established time period for the song, the traits assigned to the women speak more to how they are seen in society. For example, Aunt Sarah; her vignette follows:

> My skin is black
> My arms are long
> My hair is woolly
> My back is strong
> Strong enough to take the pain
> inflicted again and again
> What do they call me
> My name is AUNT SARAH
> My name is Aunt Sarah

Aunt Sarah reflects an indefatigable Black woman. She seems to have internalized being devalued by whites in society. According to *Not Your Auntie* by Stacie Evans, a Black woman being referred to by "Aunt" quintessentially strips her of her personhood and humanity. Although "Aunt" could be considered a term of endearment in some regards, Evans asserts the term also has racist origins because it is "a direct holdover from our past of enslavement and subjugation" and reflects how white people created a jovial, asexual Black woman willing to work herself tirelessly for others. Not to mention, calling a Black woman "Auntie" meant that she was not worthy of respect (Evans). Instead of calling her Ms., Miss, and Ma'am like white

women, Black women were called Auntie to know their place, specifically by white people, in society. Through Simone's personification of Aunt Sarah, she is able to subvert this white supremacist stereotype by forcing listeners to recognize that Black women identifying with stereotypes is self-hate and damaging to their identities.

In *Dear Senator*, Essie Mae Washington-Williams's ethos is her occupation as a teacher, which plays a big role in her writing style. By positioning herself as a teacher, she writes in a manner to provide the formal names of events and people in history; Jacobs did not have the ability to look back and educate anyone on history, because she was living it and Simone is writing to entertain. And because she explores her mixed-race identity, she conveys the information in a textbook heavy fashion, using language that a woman like Jacobs would never use, which is possibly related to the fact that her memoir discusses a notable white man in a position of authority. In this passage Washington-Williams excavates the deep-seated racism of Reconstruction, when she mentions, "The chief instrumentality of white southern rebellion against Radical Reconstruction was the Ku Klux Klan. The white southerners may have blamed the Yankees for their troubles, but they took this hatred out on southern blacks" (Washington-Williams 51). Compared to Simone, her style is informative, yet impersonal like academic writing. Simone's song comes from a deeply intimate place, one that need not be overly explained to fully grasp the concept of. Washington-Williams, however, writes from a place of confusion, because she did not grow up knowing and understanding the details of her sordid history. And perhaps to establish her credibility as Thurmond's daughter, as well as to make sense of her place in history, she had to write it in a way that made sense to herself and the public, from the standpoint of an educator.

Another method of Black women's rhetorical choices includes the intersections of Blackness, womanhood, and sexuality. Black feminist Pearl Cleage, notes intersectionality as "we (Black women) have to see clearly that we are a unique group, set undeniably apart because of race and sex with a unique set of challenges" (55). In *Toward A Black Feminist Criticism* by Barbara Smith, adds "exploring how both sexual and racial politics and Black and female identity are inextricable elements in Black women's writings" (137). In *The History of Mary Prince,* Prince conveys a lot of information and overlay of Black womanhood and sexual politics. Prince was subjected to extreme physical violence at the hands of her white masters. In one passage she recounts a disturbing memory where her master would, "strip me naked - to hang me up by the wrists and lay my flesh open with the cow-skin, was an ordinary punishment for even a slight offence" (258). Prince's testimony interrelates to *Medical Bondage* in the sense of her body being unable to escape the white male gaze and ownership; hooks asserts that, "Sadistic floggings of naked black women were another method employed to strip the female slave of dignity" (hooks 59) and that Prince's nakedness, "served as a constant reminder of her sexual vulnerability" (hooks 34). Prince's naked beatings were stark cues that neither body nor her sexuality were hers either, but rather her white master's.

In *Incidents* Jacobs does not endure the sexual sadism spoken about by Prince, but she was always under the threat it and experiences her fair share of sexual harassment as a slave girl. In one such passage, she mentions:

> He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of. I turned from him with disgust and hatred. But he was my master. I was compelled to live under the same roof with him - where I saw a man forty years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandments of nature. He told me I was his property; that I

> must be subject to his will in all things. My soul revolted against the mean tyranny. But where could I turn for protection? No matter whether the slave girl is as black as ebony or fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men. (Jacobs 104)

Jacobs's testimony speaks of the legalized abuse inflicted by her white master, Dr. Flint, and how unprotected she was. He could treat her how he pleased and she would be the one demonized. She could not resist his malice or express how this made her feel when Dr. Flint intentionally went out of his way to remind her of how powerless she was. The system of slavery was not built for the benefit or the interests of Black women, but for white men. Jacobs may have had more privilege because her grandmother was free and living near her; her master was also afraid of her grandmother in many respects too. However, regardless of age, as Jacobs states, this was a normal part of an enslaved Black woman's experience.

In the song "Four Women" Simone conveys a similar violent experience exhibited in Prince and Jacobs's narrative with a vignette about a mixed-race Black woman named Saffronia which follows:

> My skin is yellow
> My hair is long
> Between two worlds
> I do belong
> My father was rich and white
> He forced my mother late one night
> What do they call me
> My name is SAFFRONIA
> My name is Saffronia

Simone channels the persona of a mixed-race slave woman to better explain her narrative, especially on a socio-cultural level mixed-race slaves were considered Black. As Saffronia, she

alludes to being the result of reproductive abuse and sexual violence. Her mother, a Black enslaved woman, could not resist the violent sexual advances and power of her slave-owning father. Most mixed-race offspring during slavery were the result of rape. Simone does not skirt around the facts surrounding Saffronia's existence in society, and forces listeners to recognize she was conceived through rape. She does not need to say her mother was Black, the context makes that obvious. Saffronia's vignette does not protect or uphold the sexual fantasies that white men conjured up about enslaved Black women, such as those mentioned in *Mongrel Nation* or by historians in the *New York Times.* Her mother was a victim and her father was a predator.

Silence as a Rhetorical Tool for Subversion

A second illustration of rhetorical moves made by Black women in *Incidents*, *Dear Senator*, and *The History Mary Prince* lies in the motifs of silence, whispering, or concealment. In *Incidents*, after Jacobs runs away from Dr. Flint, she lives in a garret above her grandmother's home. She notes that "Grandmother stole up to me as often as possible to whisper words of counsel" (Jacobs 203). According to Stover whispering was used as a form of oppression against slaves, especially in *Incidents*, but even more so, slaves subverting this tool of oppression. She states, "The controlling nature of slavery usually made direct communications between slaves almost impossible; their clandestine whisperings represent the mother tongue's way of indirectly resisting oppression, making it a resistance that defies detection by the ruling white powers" (110). Jacobs is a runaway with a bounty on her head, so it is practical that she remains hidden in order to survive. She is lonely and forced to remain isolated. Her grandmother cannot openly show Jacobs affection or support. Nor can Jacobs walk freely among her grandmother's home. Not only does whispering serve as an effective method of communicating for Jacobs's

grandmother to avoid the detection of slave hunters, but whispering serves as a form of resistance to the oppressive institution of slavery.

As further extension of silence and concealment, in Washington-Williams's *Dear Senator*, she learns her existence is shrouded in secrecy. Born two generations after slavery, Washington-Williams, the offspring of a white senator named Strom Thurmond and Black woman named Carrie Butler, is reared by her maternal blood aunt and uncle. Her aunt and uncle conditioned Washington-Williams to accept information and violence in the world around her without question. The silence surrounding her parents her true parentage makes her confused:

> My mantra was 'accept' and accept I did, at least outwardly. Yet inside me was pure turbulence. Because of Mary's conditioning to keep my mouth shut, and because of the precarious and ephemeral nature of my relationship with my 'new' parents, I always felt I was skating on very thin ice. On the other hand, I had no desire to get off the pond. I remained fearful, cautious, and deeply insecure. I was uncomfortable in the way I would have guessed that spies were uncomfortable, having to juggle different identities, present different facades. (45)

She is aware that she cannot discuss anything surrounding the identity of her existence. She is also aware that social norms surrounding interracial relationships are unacceptable. Although she was born in South Carolina, but raised in Coatesville, Pennsylvania, interracial marriages were not commonplace. Washington-Williams notes that an interracial relationship there was "cause for enormous gossip among our neighbors" and punctuates this with "imagine would they would say about me" (43). Given her "be seen and not heard" upbringing in addition to learning Thurmond's identity could not be broken, she is forced to remain silent about it.

In Prince's narrative, she also does not identify the abusive language used by her master and conceals what he said to her from the audience. At one point where Prince disobeys her master, he not only physically abuses her, but verbally too. However, rather than name what he spews towards her, she instead says this, "After abusing me with every ill name he could think of, (too, too bad to speak of in England,) and giving me several heavy blows with his hand, he said, 'I shall come home to-morrow morning at twelve, on purpose to give you a round hundred'" (259). Despite identifying the physical abuse he inflicted, she protects him by not allowing the reader to experience the full scope of his abusive language. Sandra Pouchet Paquet's article *The Heartbeat of a West Indian Slave: The History of Mary Prince,* Paquet suggests an alternative way of reading Prince's passage. She states that Prince, "speaks and acts in silence to curb the actions of a cruel and abusive slave master," (139). She sees Prince as subverting and silencing her master's language by not giving him power, because she is the authority.

Sexual Violence as Indirect Speech

A third rhetorical move used by Jacobs in *Incidents* and Washington-Williams in *Dear Senator* is indirect speech about sexual trauma and violence. In this passage, Jacobs stresses the matter of silence regarding paternity and how this enslaved Black woman rebelled against that unspoken rule with, "When the lover was delivered into the trader's hands, she said, 'You promised to treat me well.' To which he replied, 'You have let your tongue run too damn far; damn you!' She had forgotten that it was a crime for a slave to tell who was the father of her child" (93). In this particular case, the enslaved Black woman was easy to dispose of, especially since, as hooks reiterates, "the black woman was not protected either by law or public opinion, she was an easy target" (66). As property, nothing was in her favor and the slave master could

have killed her if he wanted to, much like what the Missouri courts did with Celia. Reading Jacobs's more in-depth, the enslaved Black woman was promised to be treated better if she kept quiet about her white master's sexual abuse. Hooks mentions how enslaved Black women were rewarded by their white masters and overseers with gifts or money if they bore children (hooks 64).

Even in *Dear Senator,* there is a similar allusion towards slavery of silence. In order to keep enslaved Black women overly dependent on the white slave master, hooks asserts, "the master contrived a random system of sorts, forcing her to pay with her body for foods, diminished severity of treatment, the safety of her children, etc." (46). Butler did not have to work, which would have been unusual for a Black woman in the 1920s and 1930s; she received financial support through Thurmond. Her mother mentions that she accepted money from Thurmond because he could not openly love her (Washington-Williams 24). Although these aspects are absent from Jacobs's testimony of this woman as far as gifts and implied in Washington-Williams's, the sexual coercion is present because both were forced to keep silent about their children. And with the promise of better conditions for their children, both the slave master and Thurmond used ruses to make the women more compliant with the reproductive abuse he inflicted.

Washington-Williams applies indirect speech from relatives of hers to further understand the truth about her parents. However, what is told to her through a maternal aunt of hers aligns with earlier historians suggesting sexual violence is romance, which compels her to apply the same lens to her parents's relationship. She is told by her Aunt Calliope that white men, "were entitled, by nearly divine right, to have the run of the henhouse, or slave quarters" (53-54) which was true during slavery. White slave-owning men could sexually assault or coerce enslaved

Black women and at times were even encouraged to do so as a passage into manhood. But, her Aunt Calliope offers a contradiction with, “The massas all looked after their children, no matter who birthed them. That was part of what it meant to be a gentleman” (54). She implies that white men who legally raped and manipulated Black women and forced them to bear children were morally sound gentlemen, because they may have semi-acknowledged their paternity.

After explaining to Washington-Williams that during Reconstruction white men “took in a former slave as a common-law wife and had children with her”(55), she does not see this as malignant or controlling on their part. As a matter of fact, through indirect speech she surmises that her white father’s financial bribery of her mother and self as, “a long standing Edgefield tradition” (55) perhaps as strategy to not deal with the repercussions of saying it herself. Based on her mother’s account, she was a maid for the Thurmond household - a family of three sons and two daughters. Her mother initially caught the eyes of George, Strom Thurmond’s older brother, who “flirted” with her. He backed off when Strom showed a growing inter
est in her. He was twenty-three at the time with her mother being fifteen. From what sounds like grooming, Washington-Williams notes Thurmond, “got to know her by helping out in the kitchen and vegetable garden behind the big house” (42) with her mother corroborating this with, “One thing led to another” (42) implying a sexual contact took place. Even though Washington-Williams accepts her mother’s narrative as benign to cushion the blow of reality, what her father inflicted before and after her birth was no different than what slave-owners did to Black enslaved women. Because she cannot refute what is told to her, using reported speech aids in the way she understands her familial history.

For Washington-Williams the indirect speech in the tales of interracial love and sex were anything but, especially with her mother. It revealed her mother’s relationship to her father was

more akin to bondswomen in slavery. Butler, a minor, was sexually coerced and manipulated by the hands of a powerful white man, much like how Hemings was a minor who was raped and coerced by a powerful white man; neither man faced any social or legal backlash because the system was built in their favor. Even more so by believing what was told to her, she eluded accountability on the information passed onto her.

Conclusion

Incidents, The History of Mary Prince, Dear Senator, and "Four Women" each offer different vantage points towards using rhetorical strategies Black womanhood, sexuality, and Black women's identities during and after slavery. Jacobs offers more than just a slave narrative. Her literacy provides visibility to enslaved Black women's voices, familial history, colonial laws, physical and reproductive abuse. She uses silence and whispering as not only a form of literary rebellion and resistance, but that operates as a rhetorical strategy towards understanding her narrative. Prince's narrative undercuts white male power over her narrative by disavowing their violent words, but placing the onus on them. Simone's narrative subverts stereotypes of Black women by personifying them in music and forces listeners to reexamine the damaging identities white supremacy has placed Black women. Washington-Williams uses her occupation as a teacher to reinforce herself to readers as a credible source and also silence as a form of reported speech. With indirect speech as a rhetorical move she does not have to take responsibility for what others have said. In their own ways, they usurp whiteness by reclaiming agency over what Blackness meant from a colonial viewpoint to a post-colonial society and by creating new frameworks to best understand Black women's literature and art. They may have been tied to chains and legacy of slavery, but their autobiographical narratives speak otherwise.

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