“What was her name?”: Pre-Nineteenth Century Slave Women’s Fragmented Narratives

by

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Abstract

Accessing the narratives of enslaved women before the nineteenth century is challenging but necessary because of the limited ways we understand their experiences. The archive we primarily depend on does not provide unadulterated, first person accounts, but the need for multiple voices in literature and history does not have to be compromised because of it. This dissertation argues that our desire to reclaim the experience of pre-nineteenth-century slave women should continue to lead us to the archive with different lenses to recover and, when necessary, reimagine their lived experiences. The first chapter considers the limitations of Phillis Wheatley and her work, which have been representative when thinking of pre-nineteenth century slave women. The second chapter explores enslaved women's transatlantic journeys to the Americas and the impact the journeys had on them during their transformation into slaves. This exploration points to the archival evidence where fragments of enslaved women's experiences can be found and considered together with what we know about the journey from slaves' perspectives. The third chapter considers how material culture does and can continue to play a role in filling in areas of the enslaved women's fragmented narratives. The fourth and final chapter looks at Toni Morrison's contemporary literary response to the limited archival presence of enslaved women before the nineteenth century and how she reimagines their experiences. Her contemporary work stands as one type of model to reimagine their stories so that they are not marginal.

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Preface

"Snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat"

> I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
> Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat:
> What pangs excruciating must molest,
> What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?
> Steel'd was that soul and by no misery mov'd
> That from a father seiz'd his babe belov'd:
> Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
> Others may never feel tyrannic sway?[1]

Breathing is optional for those awakened from startling dreams. It is in those first few moments that the dreamer tries to decide if breathing will free them or bind them in ways they will not be able to ever understand. It is the premonitions that make nothing ever seem real until everything has been revealed, and for a small girl with her future embodied in her smile, everything always seemed real. The tall, smooth, green, dew-laden blades that seem to touch the sky[2] *would feel refreshing when skipping behind the towering statue of a man who called her so she would not fall too far behind* (Adams and So 4–8). *During these moments, neither daughter nor father could understand the fragments of memory or of the future that flashed before them the night before as they slumbered, creating premonitions or maybe just uneasiness. Only daily*

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[1] From Phillis Wheatley's "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth, His Majesyt's Principal Secretary of State for North-America, &c." (40). This poem inspired and encouraged my reimagining of a young girl's experience of being taken from her home and forced into slavery. The reimagining sections included in my introduction are not meant to exclusively represent Wheatley.

[2] Throughout my creative reimagining piece, I will cite the texts that provide details about nature and pre-nineteenth century enslaved people's experience to show how narratives and historical evidence influence my understanding of pre-nineteenth century experiences. Adams and So include maize as a part of the landscape in Western Africa, particularly regions in Senegal (4-8). The in text citations are included to show that the descriptions, primarily the ones about nature, were researched and inspired by those found in texts about various areas in Western Africa.

chatter of kidnappings could set up camp in their minds and cause excruciating excitement any time their eyelashes brushed their cheeks.

Danger never seems dangerous to the protected young, so the tiny palms of the young girl often brushed the warm earth causing a startled giggle whose pure tone would surround her with happiness as she bounces back and floats across the village grazing through the strong legs of the women, some sharing stories of loss followed by testimonies of mercy. These pillars of human protection had yet to fail the young girl whose eyes overflowed because she needed to capture every color, texture, and movement of the seconds and people surrounding her. She longed to become like them – wearing a dark crown upon a curved stature beaming with an undeniable beauty and an "uncommon grace"[3]*(Equiano 25). She often mimicked the women bent over tilling the soil of their personal gardens of corn or yams as the rainy season approaches.*[4] *The earth provided all that she needed, and to feel the dry yet smooth pile beneath her knees would be what carries her through the day. To feel the divine nature was to always be considered a moment meant for the blessed still left in "Afric's happy seat."*

As she approaches two women weaving their words together, creating a portrait for all who hear them, she imagines how she could say the same conversation, but use different words to paint her own picture. Her silence allows her ample time compared to yesterday's listening session, and her lips move in real time with their moving lips as she practices her future duty of camaraderie with other women in her community.

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[3]In Equiano's narrative, he describes the women in his society as being "cheerful" and having an "uncommon grace" (25). His account provides a young male perspective of how women were viewed in a particular African society.

[4] Adam and So mention personal gardens that women would tend to as well as mention rainy seasons.

When one of the women finally glances down and their eyes meet, the young girl's legs become intermittently parallel as she runs away to avoid the scolding she would receive because she had concerned herself in matters not even fit for women who had endured labor pains. Once at the edge of the village, she shuffled through the arching, thorny, green bush hoping to be engulfed with some shade that would be the sanctuary for the puzzle pieces she desired to put together for her own piece of art[5] (Equiano 34; Adams and So 4–8). *Before she could commune with her pieces, her name reaches her from her father's breath pushing past the stale air to the cool corner. She catalogues this moment for a time yet to be seen and takes obedient strides in the direction of the rich, tall, earthen walls from which she met echoes of her name*[6]*(Equiano 23; Adams and So 3).*

Little would indicate that her heartstring could ever be detached from its original source. Her father's rough, heavy hands felt like work and love each time she touched them. She wondered if her hands brought him comfort and connection the way his did for her. She would listen intently from afar as he would fill the air around them with belly laughs, and curiously be astonished by the sound because it was so distinct. Her later life would cause her to turn her head quickly when she heard a similar laugh float through the air and long for a moment similar to this. And though she would never connect with his laugh the same, she could never know the words for which to brush the atmosphere with to show that this once had been her reality and not just a dream.

[5] Equiano describes thick bushes (34), and Adams and So describe thorn-bushes (4-8).
[6] Equiano and Adam and So discuss walls that a man may have built around his houses where he and his wives stayed.

Dusk presented a chance for nourishment in the form of rice[7] *and plantains*[8]*(Adams and So 66; Equiano 22). The warm smooth grains followed by the soft, sweet pieces were a perfect combination. Once the warming rice and the plantains met her belly, her body began to feel the weight of the day's activities, and despite resistance, sleep makes itself at home. Her father swoops the young girl, who is only heaviest when asleep, up, and as he carries her to bed, he sends prayers of protection and gratefulness to the only place he knows they can be answered and acknowledged.*

Night never really provided a moment of rest for her father. His worries of the captors always made him want to keep watch. However, he vowed to not let fear paralyze him. Surely no one would come for his family or for him, but he had heard stranger things. The rate in which people were being marched toward the endless ripples of water that created the ocean had increased, and it seemed that it drew nearer to their village with each new detail. To lose the women and children that he provided for would not settle well with his soul. He would not be able to survive. The high level of anxiety almost smothers him, so he retreats to a meditative prayer hoping that he is only overreacting.

That night would replay over and over for both daughter and father. The next day would begin with the same adventure to the village center where her father would remind her that her imagination should not lead her into desolate places near the river bed. For he knew the dangers that taunted them, and he desperately hoped she would be obedient as always. His look after her lingered longer than it ever had, and she did not realize that her teeny back would be the last sight he would have of her. It would only seem like moments had passed when chaos exploded in

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[7] Rice is food that is documented in Adams and So (66).
[8] Equiano writes about plantains as a type of food that was present in his West African homeland (22).

their community. Muffled screams left the young girl in a frozen state. Her first instinct sent her leaping for her bush sanctuary where bristles of smooth yet pointy leaves provided a startling, soft place to land and wait, but a swift hand blocked the entrance. Nowhere to turn had left her with men who would be nothing like her father. And when she could find the courage to write anything, she would only be able to write, "snatch'd"[9]*(Wheatley 40). And then it would take years for those seven letters to gather together in meaning, which even then would not be able to measure the depth and width of the moment that would alter anything she may have dreamed of. The broken pieces of her heart would always attempt to be restructured, but one piercing question would keep it broken, "What sorrows labour in my parent's breast?"*[10]*(Wheatley 40) The calico material dangling from her waist in shreds showed the kidnapper's lack of care in the way his fingernails caught the fabric and tore it to untangle. Her cries joined the symphony of shrieks, yells, screams, moans, and unrecognizable noises.*

When she found consciousness from time to time, she would feel the leaves of the spire trees[11] *brush against her, tickling her arm, as she would be dragged along with the others* (Adams and So 4–8). *She did not recognize any of the faces that surrounded her. Her longings for the freedom of running around the houses within the four earthen walls were stifled each time she had to catch her breath when making a double step to keep up with the rest. The uneven ground leading to an unknown path felt nothing like the light, smooth mats found in her home*

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[9] The spelling and term "snatch'd" comes from Wheatley's poem established at the beginning of this introduction.

[10] I have chosen her father as the one she remembers. I note that the apostrophe and s indicates one parent along with the singular version of breast.

[11] Adam and So include spires as part of the landscape (4-8).

where each step felt cool and molded to her small arch[12] *(Equiano 24). Each step she now took seemed like a mixed attack of heated yet sharp pangs.*

Faces cannot be recalled, but that oppressive air mixed with the human odors of forced travelers with no steady rituals of washing could never be forgotten. The stickiness of the heat caused continuous drops of sweat that sometimes stung as it moved into her eyes or left the taste of salt when it dribbled into her mouth. Though her memories would be hazy as the air could be that time of year, she could never forget the sight she would set her eyes on when they reached an area of the world for which she had not yet been exposed. The expanse of water, the grainy floor beneath her growing feet, and the wood structures that she cannot comprehend would impact her worldview forever.

Lining what seemed to be the edge of the solid ground were wooden pieces similar to the seat she would climb up and down inside her home. From a distance it was difficult to see what they sat atop of that also housed their feet. It would be later when she would be escorted to the vessel when she would notice the carved areas where she would sit on her final voyage away from the continent that she would never really know. Her encounter with the ship would be mystical because she could not fathom what would be on it. Standing what seemed to be miles above her[13]*, the belly of the ship caught her attention first. It did not seem to weigh the water down though it looked massive, but the water did not seem to buckle too much under its pressure. Her still growing brain would run wild picturing phantoms and supernatural creatures that she had only heard of in tales. The undecipherable languages cause her head to spin. Would they*

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[12] Equiano describes the mats that lined the homes in his community as being similar to the calico and muslin that their clothing is made of (24).

[13] In Caretta's biography of Wheatley, he includes measurements: "a little less than seventy feet in length, about twenty feet in width, and in feet in depth" (4).

cook and eat her?[14] *(Equiano 40). Would they sacrifice her to some creator that only hears prayers after little girls were burned? What peculiar world allowed something solid to stand on top of water? She would never really comprehend that shattering moment when water became a massive, never ending, glinting ripple and ships became an alien home. Before she could even get near the ship that would become her namesake, she could hear things that did not need to be translated. Shrieks and groans were universal as they came from both the living and the near dying, and her worst nightmare seemed more like a dream in comparison*[15] *(Equiano 41).*

Approaching the vessel, she recognizes that the colorless beings seemed to only be what her father is. None of their creatures resembled the physical body of the women she had known, some of which she saw in the dark, dank pit, from her beloved community. Cautiously relieved to be in the light and safely afloat on the magical waters, she became very concerned with serious matters. Who would help her wash, cook her food, or help her dress? Who would be waiting on her in the wooden structure or carry her to bed when she would find herself sleepy? Who would know to feed her plantains cooked so they would not be too mushy when she bit into them? Questions swirled around in her head with each new image she captured when she saw a new person. When she got a chance to look up, she noticed the sky and grayish puffs of clouds in the sky and wondered what that meant. She had not seen such an open sky like this since she had last been to the riverbed – the place where she enjoyed running up and sliding down the low hills that lined that area[16] *(Adams and So 3).*

[14] Equiano shares these concerns in his narrative. Vincent Caretta mentions that in the biography he does of Wheatley.

[15] Equiano describes sounds he heard from the ship including "shrieks of women" and "groans of the dying" (Equiano 41).

[16] Adam and So discuss rivers and riverbeds along with low hills (3).

Her daydream would be disrupted as she was jostled up to the man with no color whose arms were extended to catch her. His mouth moved, but she could not understand the words they formed. Tears created multiple stains down her face, and the men's unclear words came fast. She was quickly passed to another set of men, and one of them sent her down a dark hole that reeked of a stench that she would never be able to remove from her nostrils[17] *(Equiano 39). Her first instinct was to release her food from the day over a packed pile of people. This only added to vile mixture of excrements that had to be culprits of the odor that greeted her once passed along to a group of women, one of whom seemed sick.*

Her senses would never fully wrap around the different elements of the magic wood structure on the endless waters. Inside the bottomless pit of people, she would find nothing of comfort. With countless pleas from the shackled men and some women, she finally ceased to cry out for all that had been familiar to her. The colorless creatures dotted around arranging and rearranging those that were being passed down among those already anchored. Catching snippets of her native language, she struggled to see who she knew and if she could get near them. Squirming, she often wrestled with those given dominion over her for the ride, and they held her and spoke with their lips to try and get the message to her that she must be still. Their actions and words did nothing to bring to light what this dark space meant and what it would become. Will the waters beneath them become heated and cook them all? Will they ever see light again or their homes? What will this transport be for them?

Questions swirled amidst the stench, swirling together to make confusion and sickness the digestion of all who smelled it. No amount of deep breaths could calm the questions or the breath-pace, which only created the angst and anxiety that would never be comforted even when

[17] Equiano describes the stench when he got on the slave ship (39).

the vessel landed near lands that the young girl had never seen. The melody of the chants and prayers of a people, who at once have been united against their will, rang out over her head and joined with a sway, a weird rocking, that moved beneath her to make her doze off to sleep from time to time. Those small bouts of slumber would be broken up with the jerks of movement that arose from places unknown in the opaque space that now no longer had room for the small girl child to even begin to think of moving around in unrest.

Her belly flipped, knotted, and shook with hunger introducing a feeling she had never felt before. No amount of nourishment could meet the mixture of desires her stomach produced. The unknown carries a heaviness that cannot be easily fed, especially when no known normalcy would be present for the little child. How she got here would be a mystery she would never be able to fully revisit and share. The transformation of innocence into the depths of flawed human reality for which there is no return began in the bottom of the ship's belly, a discord for which there is not a cure.

"Phillis" floated around the air for quite some time since she'd been brought to the cryptic shores that she only knew lay well beyond her village. It meant nothing to her other than the language that she had begun to weave with her native language in her head. She did not know at the time, but this word would form to direct people to the shores of the new land and then lead people to point to her and decide who she is and what she would be because of it. Nothing about this word described freedom, and though the many ways it had been said evoked a mixture of feelings, it now only sounded like a monotonous call that signaled she was no longer home.

"Phillis."

She didn't turn. Hearing these sounds had never been a major concern of hers.

"Hester."

Straight ahead she stared with eyes that had seen and not understood many things during the travel to this new place.

"Virginia."

The repetitive sounds made her turn so that her back faced the water. All she could think is that maybe the noise of it meant something different now. Before her stood two colorless men and, a rarity, a colorless woman. She noted her coverings as they placed them on most of her body that made her feel warmer than the air around her felt. What lies hidden beneath all of that? Questions never stop for the young child.

"What sorrows labor in my parent's breast?" What dangers lie around the corner? Will I ever be home again? Will I ever know how to share what the journey was like? Will anyone believe what I have to say? What good will words do? How will life move forward in such uncertainty?"

For the colorless people who did not grasp what has happened, everything seemed fine. Reaching with her longest finger, the woman grazed the young child's wrist. She had no way of comprehending what the woman said, but the touch spoke in a more settling way than what she had been exposed to for those many days. Her uneasiness still cloaked her naked body, but she became curious as to what this new path would lead her to.

Flashes of her community would move to the forefront of her mind as she coped with peculiar exchange that the new shore became witness to. A splash of water caused images of the riverbed to make her shake as if the air were frigid. The chill climbed her spine and a melancholic mood moved to her face. This moment would be pivotal to the desire she would have to capture her masters' language and speak of their deaths. They could never understand the

loss she had hidden away in her heart because only the language she was born with could bring justice to the people and the experiences that she longed for.

With little knowledge of the consumer and of her state as a product, she could not describe the journey to the new place that she would reside. Her dejected expectations could only hope to see others from the wooden vessel again. Even if she could just heard mutterings of sounds that she knew from her home, she could settle her stomach just a bit. Nothing could be seen or heard to satisfy her hunger for home. It seemed the water that she had gotten all too familiar with on her journey to this world would not be too far from any place she stood. Her heart would constantly skip a beat and her breath would always be hard to catch because she could see the waterway that brought her here and connected to the other shore where she had been taken. A reversal of this journey would engulf her dreams and fuel her craving to return to what she knew, but her age and her fleeting memory of what was put up a hard fight in her battle to never lose her essence that could never be snatched from within her.

A strange smell – a mix of oranges and pipe tobacco – jerked her attention back to her present state. She needed to soak in all that this wooden structure had brought her to and consider what these new areas would be for her. "Mary" would be heard as a multitude of sounds that would tickle her ears, but she still could not get what it would mean. The sounds would still not come together like she would need them to, but the trickle of meanings would be the foundational education she would have of her masters' communications. With every "Sally," her name given to her by her father would disappear, and she would be wrapped in a shroud of slavery and even lose the freedom of being called by her own name. Her longings to listen for her name lessened, burying in her fragile heart the memories of what any syllable of it sounded like.

Forgotten, misplaced, or concealed, streaks of her immediate past would fly before her with each water-based sound. This place surrounded her with water in ways that her inland home had never done. Would she be able to dive in it and come back up on the other shore? It would be something she would often consider because the alluring ripples composed a song that made her feel that following them could lead her home. She had never been able to see water from almost any spot she rested. Strangely, it added to her inability to ever feel secure because being near such a vast body of water had only gotten her here. Her wishes for the spires and bushes that covered her and watched her with their full thickness only grew with each hard step she took. The place looked extremely rigid with little to no gifts of nature.[18] *Would they let her roam around outside alone? If so, would she want to? The more she took in with her small eyes, the scarier the hanging space seemed to get. With every turn it became a strain on her breath. Her chest would heave and capture the attention of the woman of no color who seemed to always look her way or move her mouth to form words that meant much of nothing to her or to her current state.*

No kind of preparation would have been useful for these moments in the young girl's forceful involvement in an institution of slavery for which she would never be able to find room for in her consciousness. Each second pushed her in a direction that desperately needed to be reversed. As she gathered feelings that jumbled into this thought, she heard, "Susannah." She turned again and her back still faced the water.

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[18] Many of the wooded areas in Boston had been "cleared and plowed" with the growing inhabitants. She probably would have noticed how flat the area was without the vegetation she had been used to seeing (Richburg and Patterson 20-21).

Introduction

Reimagining the experience of a young girl from an African community grabbed and forced into slavery is one of the main places where I began my journey with my dissertation. Thinking of her life and what it could mean to me led me to this dissertation project's primary question: Is there a pre-nineteenth century slave woman that I can identify specifically as my ancestor? The answer is clearly no, and I am not the first to ask it and long for a woman who can stand as the connection to a pre-nineteenth century past difficult to learn about. Many questions follow this longing: What descriptions can I find of her? How visible is she? How will I know who she is if I find her? Where can I find the details of her experience? Ask these questions about nineteenth century slave women's experiences and much more information becomes available. Harriet Jacob's work shows the horrors of slavery in general but even more specifically the gendered experience of enslaved women. Even beyond her representative work, the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA)[19] documented the first-person accounts of slavery revealing many individual and unique about the institution from the slaves' perspectives. However, place the waterfall of questions on the vast landscape of the Americas before the nineteenth century and encountering the lived experience of enslaved women before the nineteenth century becomes a challenge. With a more traditional archive made up of paper and material culture, the details of their experiences do not survive. This project embraces this desire to know more about women calculated as numbers instead of considered as human. By complicating and interrogating this longing, I work to add to the conversations that seek to learn more about pre-nineteenth century slave women as humans with lived experiences.

[19] The WPA's interviews resulted in the Slave Narrative Collection. This collection contains more than 2,300 first-person accounts gathered in the 1930s. For more information about the collection and to access the narratives, see *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938* on *The Library of Congress*.

Researchers, historians, and scholars such as Toni Morrison, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Saidya Hartman, Frances Smith Foster, and Hortense Spillers use fragments of the past and from the margins, and this is where I return with my work. Those trading for these enslaved women hoped to create a system that caused the individual lives of these women to remain in a static slave identity. Their intentions were to add them up with the inanimate objects they would share a vessel with.

However, the drive to make these humans anything but could not happen then and cannot happen now. As Morrison notes in her speech "A Humanist View," humans cannot be measured as rice or turpentine (Morrison, "A Humanist View"). For some that may seem like a small observation but it is a fragment that has gotten and continues to gain attention. The questions I have about the pre-nineteenth century slave woman I seek led me, as it has many others, to sources with variable problematic aspects through which to recover these women's experiences. The first person account is one of them, and the pre-nineteenth century has limited preserved and unadulterated accounts of enslaved women. Those texts that are available represent important sites but have limitations as well, to be outlined below. That leaves the recovery of pre-nineteenth century slave women to extremely fragmented lists and other scraps.

When working with ways to recover enslaved women's experiences, it is a hope that the pre-nineteenth century slave woman we long for may arise. And for some people, if there is a representative pre-nineteenth century slave woman, she is Phillis Wheatley. Wheatley read and wrote in her masters' language, and she has poetry and letters. That alone attracts researchers to her body of work for analysis of pre-nineteenth century enslaved women. Initially, Wheatley and her work began to answer the questions I posed earlier, but even after examining those answers, I had more questions. The limitations of her work become apparent when seeking clear details of

the enslaved women's experiences. Taking the earlier questions posed and placing them next to Wheatley's work does not satisfy the search for enslaved women's specific experiences. My reimagining of a young girl began with my questions I had for Wheatley. It is through imagining a young girl's life before she is captured and entangled in the web of slavery, and my attempt helped me understand the challenge and complexity of desiring to find a pre-nineteenth century woman in the archives that embodies everything I want to know and satisfy what I believe I, and many others, should have a right to know. It is impossible to say, "Yes, there is *a* pre-nineteenth century slave woman – one who answers all questions." It is not problematic to want to connect with one pre-nineteenth century slave woman who completes an ancestral line, but the places we go to look were and are laden with challenges. It is not realistic, though the archives would falsely lead some to believe, because "history is percentiles" (Morrison, "A Humanist View"). It also places Wheatley forever in a precarious position, containing her in a representative role that oftentimes dismisses the complexity of her identity and how she is visible and invisible both then and now.

The absence of Wheatley's explicit written description of her experience as a young girl from West Africa[20] validates the complexity of a very visible pre-nineteenth century slave woman with much to be imagined about her story and identity. Hence the opening creative reimagining of a young girl, captured from her community and being dragged to a life of slavery. I did not want to make assumptions that all little girls stolen from their communities in Africa before the nineteenth century have parallel experiences. Many of my questions, some of them which may be thought to be philosophical and others to be lofty, of enslaved women's

[20] I am not sure of her exact homeland but many are going with Senegal or Gambia. For more information, read William Robinson's *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley: America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers*, and Vincent Caretta's *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage*.

experiences arose during my journey to better understand them: What did young girls in Wheatley's homeland do when the sun shone brightly and the wind whirled around them with a comforting breeze? Did this place look like a paradise to a young six-year-old girl? What fruit did she long for as each season changed and brought forth new vegetation? Would her giggle echo through a field of green grass or beneath a canopy of trees? What did her mother's arms feel like as she cradled her at night? Did she ever awaken in a disappointed state when she realized that her African home only resurfaced in her dreams? The frustration with these types of questions and the challenging archives stems from the fact that we do know these answers for others.

What my questions present to me over and over with is an exciting opportunity to explore pre-nineteenth century slave women from an angle that longs to recover the moments of their unknowns. I want to believe that these women remembered and kept with them those moments from their home communities, if only in silhouetted dreams, before being thrown upon the slave ships and inspected for sale. I want to believe that they knew freedom, community, and family in ways that only their lived experiences could have taught them. I believe that it is in those foundational moments of their lives that they met their distinctive identities and looked upon their surroundings with eyes that they would continue to cultivate as they adapted through force to the new languages in a strange culture. It seems evident that they did not let their identities die as they traveled over the unbridled waters of the Middle Passage. While they lose their homes, families, and freedom, they do not lose the portion of their inner selves that would want to share their words – even when that sharing was done in a limited space that would not allow them to say exactly what they wanted to say and how they wanted to say it without violent consequences. The confinements of slavery, though all slaves' experiences vary, denied them the freedom to

truly write and express themselves. What can a slave woman write about when she is still a slave? Would the pre-nineteenth century society have been open to learn of their sadness and mourning? Would stories of their families have been passed around and admired as those of others? Who would be concerned with the emotional feelings of a slave woman? Why write of others' pain and not one's own?

Yes, these women lost more than can ever be recovered when thrown into the trapping, life-sucking system of slavery. However, their loss does not disqualify them from recovery from the gaps, silences, and margins created by a variety of systems not designed to benefit them as reflected in their invisibility and visibility in texts and material culture. Their fragments of experiences benefit all when brought more towards the center. My desire to recover and re-imagine the lives of pre-nineteenth century slave women stems from a professional interest in presenting the Early American experience in a much more diverse way for students who primarily receive the historical information from classrooms rather than personal research. This desire also rises from a personal place – a place where I oftentimes struggle as a black woman dealing with remnants of loss that the countless women before me lived and died in; a place where humanity is needed so that we see these moments as more than a list of ledgers and small memories in journals or loud silence on full pages.

Those list, memories, and silences represent women whose lives and experiences were covered up by the overpowering system of slavery and continue to only peek through in contemporary moments in research questions and concerns, literature, and art. This project manifests my desires in ways that will not be linear, prescriptive, or standard. With creative stories, images, art, and research, my fragmentary style only stands to reveal the pieces of landscape of the literature left from the pre-nineteenth century and the subsequent contemporary

re-imaginings. I have found that there is no one type of text that can present a closer look at the experiences of pre-nineteenth century slave women in general and with individual slave women, like Phillis Wheatley, specifically. Their experiences are like puzzle pieces that can be seen in written texts, ship ledgers, paintings, images, and creative re-imaginings, and these pieces can be placed together to show another portrait of what life could have been like for pre-nineteenth century slave women. Scattered around they only seem like small pieces, but placed together, they present a larger focus that for me is the affected world they live in.

When describing my project to a stranger curious about my career, he looked at me and said, "You're a detective. How exciting!" I had not thought of myself that way, but I embrace that new title he offered me. I am not looking to find a document where Wheatley hid all of herself or admits what scholars have speculated. I have allowed the structured recovery paths, gaps, and silences to speak in the conversation that the privileged written word has had. What those silences and gaps might say takes away the power structure that has continued to cage the experiences of known and unknown enslaved women with no agency and authority to participate freely within the standards set by slave captains, masters, and rulers. The journey that my "detective" work has taken me on has been and will continue to be one that sets me in my interdisciplinary investigation. I look at texts created by others who are not slave women. Those texts have observations and commentary that reveal, though not from a first person account, some details of the experiences of slave women. Along with those texts, my investigation led me to ship ledgers, paintings, and contemporary fictional re-imaginings.

This interdisciplinary approach provides a better chance at recovering Phillis Wheatley's intangible emotional and creative life and the lives of other slave women before the nineteenth

century, coming close to navigating the world of affect.[21] The creative pieces show my dedication to and connection to the other artists who felt pre-nineteenth century slave women worthy to be re-imagined and included in their creative works. The courage they exhibit by acting on this is what this project will do. The visual representations of descriptions found in written texts will give me the opportunity to utilize the silences and gaps that may be filled with the visual representations. It is an ambitious project, but I believe the slave women before the nineteenth century deserve this attempt.

My theoretical framework for this project includes a range of thoughts on history, literature, and culture. This intersectional framework informs and inspires my interdisciplinary approach to complicating the archives and asking questions about the lived experience of enslaved pre-nineteenth century women. Toni Morrison, Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Michelle Cliff, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. provide perspectives that aid in the analysis of written works as well as imposed limitations that impacted the ways in which the enslaved women shared their stories. Raising questions that illuminate the problematic archives, their works recognize the challenges of using the archives and a few primary texts and expand the approaches we take to invest in recovery and re-imagination of pre-nineteenth century slave women. Homi K. Bhabha provides an additional perspective that though not directly related to the African diaspora, provide important theoretical ideas that help approach this project from a

[21] My use of the term affect is heavily influenced by the work of Silvan Tompkins, which discusses various aspects of affect. Affective responses, according to Tompkins, “bias [a human being] to want to remain alive and to resist death, to want sexual experiences, to want to experience novelty and to resist boredom, to want to communicate, to be close to and in contact with others of his species and to resist the experience of head and face lowered in shame" (Tomkins 66–67). For additional information about various aspects of affect, see *Exploring Affect: The Selected Writings of Silvan S. Tomkins* and Peter Coviello’s “Agonizing Affection: Affect and Nation in Early America”.

specific portion of history. His work shifts the general approach to a specific position in order to learn more about the underrepresented, in the case of my project, slave women.

While Hartman, with *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, has concerns with history, her work with the eighteenth century highlights the marginal placement of slave women while considering the loss that occurs within the layers of transatlantic travel, humanity, and slavery. She establishes, "Slavery made your mother into a myth, banished your father's name, and exiled your siblings to the far corners of the earth" (Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* 103). The erasure of the enslaved women's home identity positions them in the absurd transformation that renders them outside the center of what they had known. Hartman discusses the hierarchal establishment of race and what it does to the enslaved:

> For Europeans, race established a hierarchy of human life, determined which persons were expendable, and selected the bodies that could be transformed into commodities. For those chained in the lower decks of a slave ship, race was both a death sentence and the language of solidarity. The vision of an African continental family or a sable race standing shoulder to shoulder was born by captives, exiles, and orphans and in the aftermath of the Atlantic slave trade. Racial solidarity was expressed and attempted to heal it. The slave and the ex-slave wanted what had been severed: kin. Those in the diaspora translated the story of race into one of love and betrayal. (Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* 6)

During the enslavement process "lives were destroyed and slaves born" (Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* 6). The destruction of pre-nineteenth century

slave women's lives is evident in the archive that often comes up short when looking for lived experience instead of property.

Hortense Spillers' "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" and Gates' *Signifying Monkey* cover various concerns with the multilayered existence of African-American experiences historically and how that is represented in the archival records as well as literature. Spillers establishes the "*theft of the body"* stating,

> […] their New-World, diasporic plight marked a *theft of the body* – a willful and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire. Under these conditions, we lose at least *gender* difference in the *outcome*, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not all gender-related, gender specific. (Spillers 67)

This informs the issues with recovery for pre-nineteenth century slave women in many aspects especially as it relates to the information available via the archive. It seems that the limited information in the archive is connected to the idea that oppressors worked to make a slave just that in hopes of removing the humanity that gender brings. Gates writes that to "[...] enhance reader's experience of black texts by identifying levels of meaning and expression that might otherwise remain mediated, or buried beneath the surface" (Gates, *The Signifying Monkey* xx). Even for those who are able to write and leave records, more investigation helps uncover those details that they could not explicitly establish because of the surrounding limitations of slavery.

Michelle Cliff's work *If I Could Write This in Fire* models the fragmentary narrative that inspires her work. Her creativity merges together with considerations that carry influence to the structure and style of my introduction as well as the questions driving my investment with this project. She acknowledges the necessity of a search when she writes, "As a writer, as a human

being, I have had to search for what was lost to me from the darker side, and for what has been hidden, to be dredged from memory and dream" (Cliff viii). Cliff's diasporic collection recognizes the many sites needed to build narratives not limited by the ideologies and systems that impact what we know about pre-nineteenth century slave women. Her work shows how to move toward "reclaiming as our own as our subject a history sunk under the sea, or scattered as potash in the canefields, or gone to bush, or trapped within a class system notable for its rigidity and for its dependence on color stratification. On a past bleached from our minds. [...] It means realizing our knowledge will always be wanting" (Cliff viii–ix). The "wanting" can work for our advantage to lead us into the archives and open us to non-traditional ways of recovering enslaved women's experiences.

Homi K. Bhabha's theories engage in important ways to aid my approach to this specific portion of history. They shift the general approach to the specific details in order to learn more about underrepresented people such as the slave women. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* shifts the notions of ideology about culture and agency, which contributes to the marginal position of pre-nineteenth century slave women. He shows the interrelatedness of colonialism, globalism, and various experiences such as slavery and the subsequent impact it makes on current groups and nations.

Chapter one of this project focuses on how our longing impacts our analysis of the few written texts by and about pre-nineteenth century slave women. With an analysis of these few texts, I work to show the limitations of using Phillis Wheatley as a prominent site, and build a context around it by complicating her image and writings alongside Nanny of the Maroons. This analysis is not done to discredit the work Wheatley has done but to remove the driving desire to find the pre-nineteenth century slave woman and make her be whoever has the most visibility.

Problematizing Wheatley lends to the work already done and much more mediation to recover women who are not as visible because of the collapse that occurred during the transatlantic slave trade.

Chapter two considers the deafening silence that surrounds the Middle Passage as it relates to pre-nineteenth century slave women. Oftentimes the explicit textual experience of the transportation of pre-nineteenth century slaves is as wide and deep as the Atlantic Ocean over which they travelled. Transformative travel is happening and those leading it are working to pile the pre-nineteenth century women together in enslavement and erase their individuality. In the dominant record, they become collective property. On the opposite end, we long to know the specifics of the journey from the women's perspective, and that is not available the way we see slave accounts in the nineteenth century. This chapter provides details of ships and documented experiences on the unpredictable waters and discusses the women's experiences with fragmentary details. Additionally, narratives such as Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* and *Memoir of Mrs. Chloe Spear* provide some insight into the particulars surrounding the experience from a slave's point of view. My contemporary questions only add to the complexity of an archive with a limited focus on slave women. This complex archive represents in many ways a slave system not designed for the expressions of slave women's candid experiences.

Literary analysis alone sometimes confines our research about pre-nineteenth century slave women, and chapter three considers material culture and how it enhances the critical analysis of the archive and the recovery of women's lived experiences. Clothing, torture devices, and materials from their home communities have a relative wealth of information and have been instrumental in the ways we understand pre-nineteenth century slave women's experience and

the connection to the history we have access to. How slave women used materials and how materials were used on them continue to reveal fragments that come together collectively to build sites of understanding that intersect in interesting ways with literature and history.

Chapter four moves into contemporary literature where our desire to know the pre-nineteenth slave woman can be stronger. The neo-slave narrative and projects that reimagine early American enslaved women help us uncover possibilities surrounding recovery and re-imagination. Through Toni Morrison's *A Mercy,* I explore the ways she uses the women's stories, bodies, and material culture to create narratives from fragments. Her work expands what we long for in history of pre-nineteenth century slave women. History supplies us the "facts" – mainly through privileged accounts and questionable authentication practices. Contemporary literature such as Morrison's work provides the flexibility with understanding. It gives us room to not always see the gaps and silences of the past as just that, but to recognize when there are not gaps or silences but different ways to consider slave women's experiences.

These chapters work together showing "we are a fragmented people" (Cliff ix). As frustrating as this has proven to be many times not only in my work but in others' work as well, it is still worthwhile. It reminds us that the dim archives do not have the last say on who pre-nineteenth century slave women were or what lasting impact they had on the Americas. As Eugene Genovese writes in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, "Many years of studying the astonishing effort of black people to live decently as human beings even in slavery has convinced me that no theoretical advance suggested in their experience could ever deserve as much attention as that demanded by their demonstration of the beauty and power of the human spirit under conditions of extreme oppression" (Genovese xvi). And it is these women's beauty and power that pull our

longing to the past so that we can recover, reimagine, and pull back yet another layer of the multiple ways their lived experiences were left for us to encounter.

Chapter 1

Phillis Wheatley and the Limitations of Literary Evidence

> *You may write me down in history*
> *With your bitter, twisted lies*
> *[…]*
> *But still, […], I'll rise.*
> - Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise"

Pre-nineteenth century slave women's stories move around the dominant memory of the Americas in interesting ways and should be acknowledged without our hope for the one person to be the site for all pre-nineteenth century slave woman. The archival gaps make it important to recapture, recover, and reconstruct the multiple experiences of pre-nineteenth century enslaved women. It is evident that they are speaking and producing their own words. However, because of the lack complete first-person accounts of pre-nineteenth century slave women, we often lose the multiple stories that give a more complex picture of enslaved women's experiences before the nineteenth century. Recognizing this helps us recognize ways to resurrect a more human representation of the slave women at the margins of the archive.

We look for these stories that so many read or heard while they were contemporary and long for distinct experiences filled with more than just a listing of a name on a ship log or the numeric count based on gender. This longing has served many of us well, leading us to the archive and the literary texts again to read and re-read in order to have a better understanding and encounter. Because of this type of work, scholars have recovered texts and learned more about conditions before the nineteenth century. This approach has also been problematic. This underlying longing for a standard, complete narrative leads us to linger around a few, or *the* few, texts with a more strict literary focus. One particular pre-nineteenth century slave woman we heavily rely on is Phillis Wheatley. This reliance has produced a wealth of scholarship and better

understandings, but it has also caged our conversations about the multiple experiences of enslaved pre-nineteenth century women. By exploring and complicating Wheatley as a prominent site for pre-nineteenth century slave women and their written archival presence, I show how the desire for an enslaved pre-nineteenth century slave woman can fuel research endeavors in the time period, but when using a strict literary lens can limit, in some cases, our discussion of the women's lived experiences. This chapter will explore the dominant thought on enslaved women's writing through Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia Query XIV* and how his discussion of Wheatley illuminates some of the pre-nineteenth century thought on slavery and the construction of race, the question of humanity, and the abilities of a slave woman based on those factors. It also explores the limitations of visibility, authentication, and muted pertinent topics that make Wheatley's work problematic in the search for multiple enslaved women's lived experiences.

My goal to search for pre-nineteenth century slave women acknowledges the limiting aspects of privileged scholarship and historical establishment that sometimes perpetuates the notion that pre-nineteenth century slave women are silent and that their identities are somewhat static. The questioning of their authenticity by their masters and governing bodies made up of white men points to the unrealistic longings we have to find the pre-nineteenth century slave woman in her own words. There is often a default with the authentication expectations that there is some sort of false dichotomy attached to the presence of a female slave who has written or has a story. She must have done something wrong or not been capable of agency. She must have left something out or not be considered human enough to have a narrative at all. We sometimes inflict on the slave women similar authentication practices – requiring specific criteria that assure

us that she is the one. We want her to have a written account to be supported by specific documents that show that she in fact wrote the account and truly experienced it.

Their stories are connected to very similar experiences tied together in the slave trade and system, which is captured in more of a traditional trajectory of historical memory. The collective experience helps us consider how the works we do find can reveal what most pre-nineteenth century slave women may be experiencing. However, this approach places us in interesting positions. Because of the day-to-day experiences of these women, expanding our approach to the textual evidence that we use and the women we privilege – inadvertently or not – helps us continually question and critically analyze our longings for the pre-nineteenth century women. The power of the stories that the multiple women shared impacted many women, whether documented or not. As Lisa Moore and Joanna Brooks indicate, "In the Age of Revolutions, women around the Atlantic world were telling and hearing stories that changed their understandings of themselves as women" (27). The influence of what women were writing or encountering before the nineteenth century is significant on how we consider their lived experiences, just as it impacted others who encountered or learned of their stories.

When thinking of the written works of the pre-nineteenth century, first person accounts by enslaved women do not exist in the same ways as those of the nineteenth century. In the pre-nineteenth century slave system, it is designed to strip them of all they had known and limit their ability to write and share it. This has had reverberating impact on our contemporary discussion, and we instead find fragmented glimpses into their lived experiences, and when re-approached again and again, we can continue to uncover and connect to layers of stories that need to be known. Our hope for that pre-nineteenth century slave woman wanes as these women's human qualities diminished to product inventory, and the disadvantage they had when it comes to the

written work is clear. To encounter Wheatley and her work is to be handed a torch in the dim archive. This is rightly so. She is a site necessary and important to American, African Diaspora, and African American literatures. However, when researching at her site, the critical analysis of our desire for the pre-nineteenth century woman weakens. I do not believe scholars become content with a less dim understanding of multiple enslaved women's experiences. I did find that the work does call for a continuous shift toward a more explicit look at the limits and how it influences our view on the multiple women before the nineteenth century.

Written language was a difficult vehicle for pre-nineteenth century slave women to use in order to establish a narrative to share no matter the intentions. The women recently brought from an African country and community found themselves immersed in a strange land with all of its differences, one of which being language and ways of expression. Ottobah Cugoano, a former slave in the eighteenth century, describes how there really is no language that can capture what he and, at that time, thousands of others had experienced on their forced journey into slavery. He writes that any lamentations made by those who had this experience could only be understood "distinctly […] to the ears of Jevoah Sabaoth" (Cugoano 125). Gesturing towards a deity, Cugoano seems to explain the enormity of the experience and the act of expressing it as well. In many anthologies and resurrection of written works by African people, it is clear that the number of those who write and speak about the experience pales in comparison to the number of humans that begin and survive the involuntary journey. Breaking those numbers down to the gender, women do not represent the majority of the voices. It is the visibility as slaves, and the experience that it entails before the nineteenth century, overlapping with their gender that presents a space for a fresh recovery and analysis. Repairing what slavery demolishes is a challenge that will take centuries, if ever possible. Pre-nineteenth century slave women are

essential to this, and the critical analysis of where we find them in the written text provide scholars the tools to share with those working to repair the lasting effects of the slave system.

Much of this concern with the written texts begins with the backdrop of the enslaved women's experiences. Readers, particularly those in a class with time for leisure and reading, before the nineteenth century may have had little immediate concern for the stories of female slaves because of their assertion of an experience of pain and misery.[22] The realities of a human experience of the enslaved as shown through the narratives available and the lack of stories amongst others before the nineteenth century shows a distancing of the reader from the pain, particularly in ways that the slave is out of view (Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* 20). What we are left with as readers and researchers of pre-nineteenth century works is a larger narrative with multiple stories of struggle, change, pain, loss, and grief with a glaring lack of pre-nineteenth century slave women's unadulterated stories. This lack then creates problematic limits impede upon the enslaved women and how we understand their experiences now.

The standards of privilege before the nineteenth century add a layer of difficulty when considering and researching the works related to slave women and using Wheatley as a primary site. Initial tests of authenticity administered prior to the nineteenth century are followed by continual authentication practices. As recognized in Saidiya Hartman's work when discussing the terror of slavery,

> Since the veracity of black testimony is in doubt, the crimes of slavery must not only be confirmed by unquestionable authorities and other white observers but also must be made

[22] Thomas Jefferson makes a point to establish that black people during this time period had experience with misery, but he wants to qualify it in order to create an argument for why blacks, specifically, slaves would not have the capacity to create art from their misery.

visible, whether by revealing the scarred back of a slave - in short, making the body speak - or through authenticating devices, or, better yet, by enabling reader and audience member to experience vicariously the 'tragical scenes of cruelty'. (*Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* 22)

The necessary confirmation places the stories of pre-nineteenth century slave women in precarious positions. As Hartman suggests, factors of crime, punishment, and pain of slavery and the visibility of this driving factor have been controlled by white observers through authentication practices. This impacts the stories of the women whether they survive under the surface of literary poems or in the as-told-by stories or in documented pleas for freedom. Hartman even considers, "This pain might best be described as the history that hurts - the still-unfolding narrative of captivity, dispossession, and domination that engenders the black subject in the Americas" (*Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* 51). The ever-unfolding narrative of pre-nineteenth century slave women illuminates the problem with the archive for a population of people whose stories result from the indescribable experiences of slavery. The women whose experiences have been at the margins of everything including the archive cannot be expected to give us what those who are at the center can provide through archival research, and thus Wheatley as a site becomes critical to highlight the limitations.

Thomas Jefferson on Wheatley and Writing

Thomas Jefferson may have been one of the first to recognize Phillis Wheatley as a site or even foundation of slave writing, slave women's writing more specifically. His concerns for slaves and writing that he articulates particularly in his *Notes on Virginia* represent a perspective on the concern with education and its direct connection to humanity. If someone is writing and

she is a slave, limitations exist to control her influence. No matter the talent or popularity, Jefferson shows that authentication and questioning are in place to control the influence both past and present of slave women's written work. The shadows this creates has left us with limits to constantly break around Wheatley when using her as a site, that is especially noticeable because of her gender. Jefferson's discussion of Wheatley imposes an alternative narrative that contradicts and overlooks the experience she has and how that influences her writing.

When Jefferson writes to Benjamin Banneker[23] in the late summer of 1791, he seems to have some kind of appreciation for the work that Banneker offers to the Americas, sending it to a Parisian member of the Academy of Sciences (Jefferson, "Jefferson's Reply to Banneker"). He also seems to express an empty desire to see evidence that the science of race and its connection to biology is not true. However, this letter only appears to reveal the same ideas as he drafted in his fourteenth query of *Notes on the State of Virginia*. For Jefferson, there is doubt about what those black, free and definitely slave, can and should be able to do. His writings show a larger conversation of the eighteenth century, which drives the archives that required the authentication of written works of those not considered in their equations for humanity. Even if vouched for, as shown in Jefferson's thoughts, people, such as slave women, would not have their works automatically accepted.

Thinking back to Jefferson's earlier writing, he seems to have a rollercoaster discussion in the fourteenth query of *Notes on the State of Virginia*. The leading title progresses through a

[23] Benjamin Banneker's letter to Jefferson stands as evidence of the absurdity of the biological theories connected to whether black people are human. Banneker, a free black known most for his work with almanacs and farming, shares his almanac with Jefferson and includes information sparking what can be seen as a debate about race and the discourse surrounding it. Banneker had not been enslaved, so along with gender, this separates Jefferson's approach to him versus Wheatley. For more information about the exchange, read Banneker's letter to Jefferson and Caretta and Gould's *Genuis in Bondage: Literature of the Early Black Atlantic*.

legal discourse laying out for readers the state of government and society from his privileged perspective. The early intermittent inclusions of slaves and slavery as it pertains to the law in this section do not provide the preparation needed for the soliloquy for the philosophical, scientific case for the justification of enslaving human beings on the basis of a physical attribute such as skin color. It seems Jefferson wants to work out on paper what internally he has been dealing with when it comes to establishing difference. He illuminates for readers several reasons why slaves, and for purposes of my discussion, female slaves in the Americas, have considerable difficulty speaking, writing, and existing in their complex selves from the margins. From his male, white, elite perspective, slaves receive a complex yet debasing analysis. The animal references and the maybe-maybe not approach to the humanity of slaves negate all that he can seem to deliver as his view of the eighteenth century slave. Jefferson interestingly decides that the only "fair" way to discuss and compare the slave and white people is to consider them in the Americas, a new-to-him-and-them location. As he writes, "It would be unfair to follow them to Africa for this investigation. We will consider them here, on the same stage with the whites, and where the facts are not apocryphal on which a judgment is to be formed" (Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* 256–257). Shifting the experiences of black slaves to the grossly uneven "field" of "here" represents the greater concern for understanding the pre-nineteenth century female slaves, their lived experiences, their identities, and their presence in writing. All of which then complicate Wheatley as a site. If "here" is the only "fair" locale for a discussion of enslaved female experiences of the pre-nineteenth century, what does "here" consist of? Then our contemporary question has been and continues to be, where do we go from here?

At the intersection of race, class, gender, and lived experience, "here" before the nineteenth century has been plainly a landscape of white, wealthy, male experiences where

female slaves are included often in lists and mentioned in journals and other records. Once "here" is established, the locale of pre-nineteenth century slave women's lived experience is located at the margins, even in all of their complex, fragmentary lives. This placement is most indicated through the works of the men, like Jefferson, who maintain them in margins or even outside the margins with their unfounded ideas that being "here" is the only place to consider them. However, as we have seen, and as I continue to see in an archive mostly kind to those "here," is that pre-nineteenth century slave women, even when their experiences are fragments, are in fact "here," there and everywhere. Though collectively those forced to travel and placed into enslavement in the pre-nineteenth century may be viewed as one from that aspect, they are individuals with their own stories that make up the rich diaspora. And in the attempts of those like Jefferson who stake claim to the "here," these women's stories are placed in marginal positions, posing a challenge to our longings for a pre-nineteenth century slave woman and establishing primary sites. Although his intentions may have been for him to be "fair", from the past, he has asked us to place them in the narrative of the eighteenth century "here" and in a way, consider what that means to our understanding of their experiences.

In Jefferson's fourteenth query, he takes a different approach to his inclusion of female slaves. They are not folded into his thoughts as background or placed in journal entries as part of his everyday life. Instead, he nods to them first as wrapped up in his understanding of the emotions of the male black slave. He states, "They are more ardent after their female; but love seems with them to be more an eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation" (Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* 256). Difference for him is established in an objectification of their females, an approach to align their actions with that of animals. Stripping the women of agency through an interrogation of "sentiment and sensation," Jefferson constantly

reveals the limitations set by the eighteenth century of the “here” he establishes, adding to the archive of primary works of static monoliths, and making the archival “here” problematic for those studying in hopes to make the “here” a much more diverse landscape of history and literature, of complex humanity, and multiple experiences.

Thomas Jefferson is one of the primary contemporary critics outlining what someone like Wheatley should be capable of. He lists many things – redemption, salvation, maybe food or drink – which he believes she should have access to in his limited viewpoint of humanity. Writing poetry that could compete with white writers and be accepted by a range of literate white folks was not included on that list. He immediately calls into question her capabilities. I can imagine he considered the surface level of Wheatley’s experience – enslaved at a young age, placed in the care of a master and mistress, renamed, given a new language and culture. However, his declarations of her inability to write at a standard seemingly reserved for men, white men in particular, seeps over to the woman and her stories that lie beneath that of a young slave girl who should not have the capacity to do what in fact she had done.

For Jefferson, zooming in on Phillis Wheatley as a site for what female slaves are incapable of when it comes to writing shows the importance of visiting the narratives and stories of enslaved women before the nineteenth century. It is not clear what issue Jefferson takes with Wheatley. Does he not believe in her writing because she is a slave? Or is it because she is black? Or does he anticipate that one day someone will look back and desire a pre-nineteenth century slave woman? Intersecting in his thoughts on Wheatley are race, gender, and class. While these categories alone carry a heavy burden of discrimination, the three together reveal the complexity of the pre-nineteenth century slave women’s experiences and the unique ways that their visibility and invisibility hinge on those concerns. As seen through Jefferson’s work, pre-

nineteenth century slave women's experiences and identities could not begin and end with Wheatley, though for different reasons as recognized through this discussion.

The query contains evidence of the scientific vein of understanding that Jefferson brings to his consideration of slaves in general and female slaves more particularly seen with his discussion of Wheatley. He maps out the physical differences that explain for him and others who believe in a hierarchal human race. When canvassing his concern with the physical appearances, he writes of beauty and the standards of superior beauty:

> The circumstance of superior beauty, is thought worthy attention in the propagation of our horses, dogs, and other domestic animals; why not in that of man? Besides those of colour, figure, and hair, there are other physical distinctions proving a difference of race. They have less hair on the face and body. They secrete less by the kidnies, and more by the glands of the skin, which gives them a very strong and disagreeable odour. This greater degree of transpiration, renders them more tolerant of heat, and less so of cold than the whites. (Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* 254–255)

Jefferson's work breaks down the thought concerning humanity as it relates to black people. His belief that physical differences could be indicative of beauty and should be highlighted when proving the difference of race. According to him, those designated black have characteristics that are less comely, even having a particular odor. This is the "here" of the eighteenth century: deeming enslaved women inferior and incapable. This overarching narrative is indicative of ways in which the identities and visibility of pre-nineteenth century slave women like Wheatley have been questioned and established in written texts and subsequently hovering over their places in the archives.

The scientific question of humanity extends to the minds of the enslaved. Jefferson sets up for readers how some slaves have been "situated", providing them with certain access in terms of language and education (Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* 257). This situation seems to be a foundation for his argument for why a woman, namely Wheatley, may write but, in his opinion, cannot write well. He discounts the experience of pre-nineteenth century slave women in particular by creating Wheatley as an unreliable site. He ignores the authentication standards that work for enslaved men when he considers Ignatius Sancho comparatively, separating the male slave's expression from that of female slaves though they are all at the margins. His unclear comparisons do point to the ways in which gender and race intersected for someone like Wheatley and what is at stake for someone like Jefferson intent on taking the authentication practices further with his gender comparison.

The production of someone like Phillis Wheatley, a woman forced into slavery at a young age and renamed and positioned to assume an identity not related to her home society, is indeed possible. Phillis Wheatley is doing what some during the time she is writing would consider to be high-brow literature and is not expected to be able to do that from the perspective of elite white men like Jefferson. She does not represent what the dominant class at the time would consider an appropriate physical representation of the classical work emerging that they would celebrate later as American literature. The power dynamic is kept on Jefferson's side, where the ways in which he and others in the dominating class have given slave women ideas, education, and experiences. He writes, "Religion, indeed, has produced a Phyllis Whately [sic]; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism. The heroes of the Dunciad are to her, as Hercules to the author of that poem" (Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* 258). Whoever Wheatley is, according to Jefferson, is

because of the religion that has been forced upon her by her masters. If someone does believe that she writes and writes at a level distinctive from other slave women, it all comes back to the "equal field" of "here." This insistence to make Phillis Wheatley the pre-nineteenth century slave woman – a woman only capable of being transformed by the environment surrounding her – seems to be clear. The credit is for her masters and Eurocentric community as well as religion, everyone and everything other than a black slave. The eighteenth century works to control how Wheatley establishes herself as a contemporary writer let alone human. Interjecting her in his conversation about race and humanity shows the issues surrounding the time period before the nineteenth century and the enslaved women that are not in the archives as we hoped they would be.

That is why Jefferson has to be so sure to bring it back "here" because if she is considered "there" – her unknown society, her language, her family, her education – it becomes unfair for Jefferson and those who benefit from being "here." The contradictions abound in his query of the law, where only the justification of the slave as produced in the Americas can exist, show the diversity of "here" that exists exclusively for the Americas during the evolving eighteenth century. This "here" provides a clearer idea of the strong framework surrounding Wheatley that scholars go back to again and again to see what more can we learn about a time period that seems to have left us a pre-nineteenth century slave woman but calls for us to look beyond her and see who else we can learn from. Perhaps that was Wheatley's plan – just write and hope that whoever needs to see this action can and will be able to. It may have only been the plan for herself, and while Jefferson and those invested in the ideology of an elite race engage in finding a fixed characteristic to make slavery right, Wheatley is creating a foundation, a site

much more complex and problematic in a code that really needs the stories of other pre-nineteenth century slave women in order to truly understand.

The “here” for pre-nineteenth century slave women does not consist of clear-cut lines of enslavement, but of lived experiences that can and should be narratives. The archival here does not necessarily give us the wide range first person accounts. It tries to present to us Phillis Wheatley, who deserves the presentation, but not how it has been framed for her. She reminds us that there has to be more stories though primarily fragments, in marginal, non-traditional stories that illuminate centuries that would prove to not have a hold on creating “the slave woman,” no matter how much, though for grossly different reasons, Jefferson and many of us desire this woman and all the questions she will answer and theories she will support. That drive to do so is thwarted by Wheatley herself as we work out what it means that she is a site and the impact it has on our recovery and re-imagination of the multiple stories belonging to women with lived experiences even within the confines of slavery.

Visibility

Despite what Thomas Jefferson would write to discredit Wheatley, "[...] she was able to demonstrate her own capacity for emotional work, contesting racist eighteenth-century notions of African Americans as a people constitutionally incapable of ascertaining certain forms of a feeling - a people whose 'griefs,' as Thomas Jefferson writes, were 'transient,' a people who were categorically 'impassive' or 'dispirited'" (Brooks, “Our Phillis, Ourselves” 15). It is clear through her works and likeness that what everyone knew was true – being black and a slave did not have a constitutional or scientific bearing on her and any other enslaved woman’s humanity. Internationally, she is seen on the cover of her book of poems and those controlling this

historical moment sign off to let us know that who we see and read is authentic. And here stands a major limitation of Wheatley as a site – her visibility.

As Gay Gibson Cima establishes, an eighteenth century slave woman such as Wheatley is not invisible (Cima 466). She was known within the Boston community and eventually in Europe as well because of her collection of works. Her visibility ensures that she was not completely silenced in the eighteenth century and that she was eventually recovered and not silenced in the archives. The visibility of a slave before the nineteenth century is seen in "the engravings of Phillis Wheatley and Equiano, which call attention to the assimilated presence of a subject who is Anglo-African, a hybrid third term meant to mediate between the opposites signified by 'African' and 'Anglo-Saxon'" (Gates, *The Signifying Monkey* 159). With Wheatley we get both the visibility of her physical body as well as her published significant writing – a filtered visibility of her thoughts. Though her visibility has an impact on our understanding of her lived experience and a general idea of what could have been for other enslaved women, it places her in a position that in ways detracts from any power she may find in her written texts. A closer look at Wheatley's frontispiece, her writings, and how it intersects with the writings of other slave women reminds contemporary readers of the limitations imposed on Wheatley and ultimately our desire for *the* pre-nineteenth slave woman. The larger scale of pre-nineteenth century slave women's experiences that Wheatley's life and work presents a site for fits "the very nature of history," and as Morrison recognizes, that nature is to make "*large* distinctions." Morrison continues, "Because historians must deal with rice in bulk, rather than grain-by-grain, heavy dependence on the conventions of that discipline lead us to do likewise in human relationship. If such history continues to be the major informer of our sensibilities, we will remain functionally unintelligent. Because, after all, it is the ability to make distinctions – and to

the smaller the distinctions made, the higher the intellect that makes them – by which we judge intellect" (Morrison, "A Humanist View"). It is easy to take Wheatley and make a large distinction, but sometimes it can be a distraction from the grain-by-grain approach.

Visibility for Wheatley makes her vulnerable to an encased body of work and the limiting analysis of her emotions, fears, sadness, and loss. However, the predominant overarching narrative of heathens saved by slave religion and/or property designed to only be exchanged for free labor veils the more complicated narrative of women whose existence has been greatly impacted by the removal from their communities, the travel through their continent, and a treacherous transatlantic travel that introduced them to an unknown world of people, cultures, languages, and material that often get lost in some form or the other. The transformation that occurs put the women in a precarious position to become overwhelmingly visible as one type of property with moments of individuality found throughout their acts of writing and in the writings of others.

Because of the complicated nature of the shifting ideologies and communities before the nineteenth century establishment of the "New" World and the less structured identities and systemic ideals about slave culture, the eighteenth century slave women's narrative has much to offer in the closer look at this time period and their experiences. New approaches to and ulterior analyses of canonical texts like Phillis Wheatley, claims to freedom such as Belinda's Petition, and oral testimonials shared by the narrative framing from the lens of writers who share what they have heard from women like Mary Prince and Nanny of the Maroons. Their offerings do not extend an explicit description often desired by the contemporary mind, but they call for a recognition of their visibility and what those moments, whether in a volume of poetry or a legal petition or hidden behind the words of others, mean and contribute to the narrative of pre-

nineteenth century transatlantic experiences. With particular attention on the ways in which their narratives are framed, the visibility of the women, and the parameters of writing, speaking pre-nineteenth century slave women, the larger narrative of pre-nineteenth century slavery becomes richer for the fragments woven together by an experience no one wanted for herself.

When you consider the frontispiece of Wheatley and how she has been posed, the construction of her voice is made visual. And I am not implying that someone else wrote for her or told her what to write. She is educated within a particular school of thought, and from a critical analysis standpoint, is an intelligent learner and street smart. She seems to understand from what she has learned and experienced, as someone like Frederick Douglass more clearly wrote, what reading and writing can do for her within the system she has been forced into. Though she writes and is hailed for writing, she still does not have the freedom to write about the various subjects that are implied in her book title that mean something to *her* journey, *her* loss, *her* feelings. She is yet left to the language of her foreign captors and their attention to which her limited responses become disseminated. Yes, she wrote, in a language that is not hers and that is a feat for a young girl "snatch'd," but it is also just as tortuous as her condition. She is able to survive a traumatic transformation, made into a slave woman, and learn a new culture and language all while dealing with whatever emotional and physical concerns that follow with an experience such as this. What we get visually of this is a poised woman in the frame in which her narrative exists. She is not poised or positioned based solely on her own decisions.

It is the freedom to decide that is missing for pre-nineteenth century enslaved women. The historiography of traditional historical periods typically did not have women's experiences in mind and impact the ways we view these women from the past (Moore and Brooks 9). With the privileging of white men's written works the enslaved women became covered in layers of

interpretations and stereotypes easily persisting in some form in a historical memory. Non-traditional ways of analyzing texts written by and including eighteenth century slave women continue to be vital in order to learn from their experiences. Wheatley still stands as a unique eighteenth century slave woman. In 1773, "likenesses of identifiable eighteenth-century individuals of African descent in Britain and its colonies were very unusual" (Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* 100). From a contemporary stand point, she is the "Toni Morrison [or] Oprah Winfrey of her time" (Gates, *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley* 22 and 33).

Figure 1 Phillis Wheatley Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley Boston. Frontispiece Image. *Documenting the American South*, University Library, The University of North Carolina Chapel Hill.

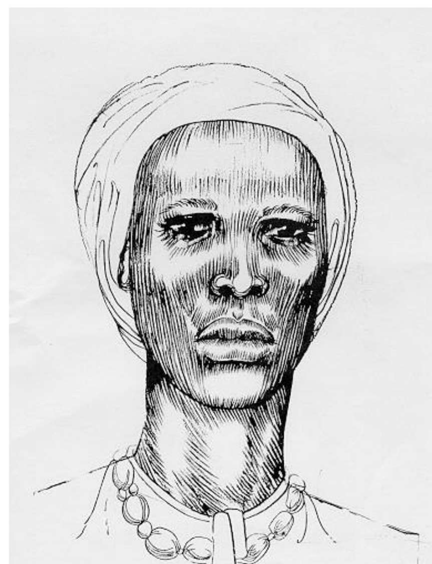

Figure 2 Nanny of the Maroons. *Jamaica Information Service*.

Focusing on Wheatley as a site for understanding pre-nineteenth century slave women proves to be interesting beyond the context of Jefferson and the century's expectations for a slave woman. This can be best seen when placing Wheatley's frontispiece together with another image of an enslaved woman with somewhat comparable visibility in the archives. Since the

images of these women have strong ties to written texts and stories, the analysis of them raise questions and complicates the desire for an accessible pre-nineteenth century slave woman. These images of enslaved women before the nineteenth century Americas are visible. Figure one is Phillis Wheatley's frontispiece, and in Figure 2 is Nanny of the Maroons. When in aligned with each other, the two women are often seen as representing extreme differences in the Americas slave experience. Their positions in slavery seem questionable, and a surface level look at them together create a knee-jerk reaction to privilege one's slave experience over the other and the longing to maybe even make one the slave woman before the nineteenth century. Together these images represent a snippet of what the complexity of multiple voices look like for eighteenth century slave women. The placement of the images side-by-side gives a more concrete look at the visibility of pre-nineteenth century slave women. A quick analysis shows that both of the women represent different visibilities: the seen and read and the seen but elusive. Both of them emerge in the archives as property – a slave woman. However, as seen in the images of them, this system, this "here" does not provide the same outcome for the two.

Both of these images have a literary connection. Wheatley's frontispiece serves as the visible marker showing her readers who she is. Nanny of the Maroons[24] is scarcely written about but often discussed in stories passed along. Wheatley's frontispiece may represent some part of the authentication process. She is the woman who is black and capable of learning and writing yet she is still a slave. Her master did not write this for her and try to pass her off as someone or

[24] Nanny of the Maroons' image represents a different perspective on being visible yet invisible in the written first person accounts of the archive. Information about her in the archive is fragmentary – like a puzzle with lots of missing pieces. Because of the missing information, scholars have filled in the gaps in various ways, including the turn to oral histories (Sharpe 24). The image featured here is the dominant one used on texts and even contemporary pieces. For more information about Nanny of the Maroons, see Jenny Sharpe's *Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archaeology of Black Women's Lives*.

something she is not. While everyone has their own authentication reasons, it seems that the literary portraits and the literature with the women described in and written by make them authentically active, vocal, and evolutionary – rising to have many meanings to incorporate in analysis in new ways. However, that is not exactly how the archive is set up to navigate these women's lived experiences. For them, to an extent, it does not matter that their master or the other parts of human power systems surrounding them believed in their abilities or craft, but that for themselves, in their present moment, they find a way to preserve, reclaim, and create their identities. We do not get specifically from them what they preserved, reclaimed, and created. When using Wheatley as a site in this instance, it is evident placing her next to Nanny of the Maroons that the site is limited. Their complex visibilities are clear, but they set standards for multiple experiences and voices.

Both of these women at some point had spoken and left behind a story though in different ways. When we view Wheatley, she does give us many of the things we want to talk about. Her frontispiece gives us race and gender and her poems give us literature and education. However, when juxtaposed with other slave women the limitations for Wheatley's work become apparent. They have distinct lived experiences, where we can gather details from them with a more collective approach or collective site.

The slave system before the nineteenth century puts in work that prompts a preference for a pre-nineteenth century slave woman. That woman is preferably the slave woman laden down with the muzzle if Jefferson had his say. She represents inhumane characteristics burdened with the task to prove her humanity though she cannot speak. It is difficult to have the preservation of her story in the hands of those who placed the iron muzzle on her. It is the valuable work of Equiano that gives us access to this gem of her lived experience. The sparse

archival information for eighteenth century slave women is indicative of the challenge met when a search begins with the longing for detailed standards that do not work. They do not work for this type of archive or these women's experiences.

Nanny of the Maroons further individualizes that enslaved pre-nineteenth century slave woman's experience in stimulating ways. Located in Jamaica, her experience raises questions of geographical concerns that mark the limitations of individual sites such as Wheatley. Nanny does not present a body of written textual work, not documented at much length in the archives, and preserved in oral histories (Sharpe 1). Her image in Figure 2 invokes strength and agency that lands on another end of the spectrum of pre-nineteenth century slave women's experiences.

Phillis Wheatley renders a representation often centered in the spectrum of slave women's experience in the Americas. Location, ownership, etc. dictated her lived experience leading others to believe it pampered or more desired. However, the "bit" just looks differently on Wheatley's frontispiece. It alone shows her positioned with a pen yet a blank piece of paper. She is shrouded in slavery with her master's name and the slave identity. The clothing she wears is not clothing reflective of the society in Africa from which she came. Her comfort in the frontispiece is manufactured and points to the creation of all things designed to keep her from having an explicit agency. The look she has could be that of contemplation or some kind of search or the signs of a system that controls identities to meet the standards set. Wheatley's frontispiece itself stands as a constant reminder that authenticity must come from the master of the privileging power. Those practices of authenticity pose some serious limitations that do not meet our expectations for the pre-nineteenth century slave woman we long for.

In the frontispiece, as pictured above in Figure 1, Wheatley looks away, holds a writing utensil in her right hand while propping her left hand. The page sitting below her forearm has a

few sentences occupying the space while the page lays there predominantly blank. Her look is pensive, in some ways signaling that she has more to say but that action cannot take place here or even explicitly at any other time that she has to write. This frontispiece becomes the face of an pre-nineteenth century slave women and her experience. Wheatley stands for some as a conversion "poster child." She has been "saved" and the transformation for them is now that she dresses, positions herself, and writes like her masters. However, with an obvious and a deeper look at the frontispiece, she is not her master; there is no sense of an accomplished transformation. This piece, though not explicitly like the woman with the iron muzzle, shows that she is far from being completely silenced while being enslaved. Her transformation has been traumatic. She has been stripped of her distinct cultural dress and traditions, no longer called by the name given her at birth, and taught to write for an audience that would not or cared not to understand what grief, loss, and family means to her. Her frontispiece is the visible indicator that is "designed to limit those implications." There is an "artistic quality [...] modest as her social status" to the piece. It "contains likeness within an oval whose framing words appear to restrict the extent of her gaze" (Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* 101). The restriction of the gaze is where the invisibility and visibility intersect. With the gaze, it points to a story that cannot be explicitly told, accepted, and understood on her terms.

What we are left with is the poised, visible Wheatley with plenty to say but not all of it representative of the multiple experiences of pre-nineteenth century slave women. But as Hartman establishes, "the slave was the only one expected to discount her past" (Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* 155). The women –Wheatley and Nanny

of the Maroons - alone can “scarcely speak”[25] in ways that are recognized and privileged, and it impacts how we choose our sites for discussions (Equiano 44). With Wheatley we know some of what she “scarcely” speaks of, but that has its limitations. Without much of the legible evidence that dominates the archive as it relates to slavery before the nineteenth century and slave women, our considerations have to continue to recognize the limitations and view the archives in various ways.

When longing for a pre-nineteenth century slave woman we often begin with Phillis Wheatley. Her written texts stand as the foundation of African American literature, and she is hailed as the mother of the tradition that emerges at this time period in the Americas (Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* 1). However, what we long to know about slave women’s experiences is not explicitly found in her. From a contemporary standpoint, scholars and readers want to know about slavery. How did African women get caught up in the transatlantic slave trade? What do they feel about their treatment? What is the day-to-day experience like? How did it feel to be free? Unfortunately, we do not get answers as we have gotten from the nineteenth century. We do not get a distinct description of what it is like to live in a foreign place and slave system. Wheatley’s work cannot provide us that because of the ways her masters and the controlling community muted her. The who, what, when, where, and how of using texts to work towards resistance and unite against the systemic horrors of slavery had not been specifically figured out for women like Wheatley who were learning and writing. And understandably so. Forced from their communities and networks, dragged into different cultures

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[25] In Equiano’s narrative, he describes a woman who is covered with torture devices to the point that she can “scarcely speak.” I view this slave woman with the iron muzzle as a representation of some of the limitations of silence. Equiano through his description of the woman muzzled with the iron, seems to beckon us to look more to hear and see in areas where the women were limited but still leaving behind what we would consider evidence.

and languages just do not give a writer like Wheatley the space to write about what we long to know about. Once slavery in the Americas shifts in more definitive ways, slave women like Harriet Jacobs[26] could write a bit more candidly, under certain circumstances, about her slave experience that served as not only an abolitionist text but a glimpse into what slave women's lives looked like.

Step into any history or literature course including the pre-nineteenth century slave woman Phillis Wheatley, and it is likely that you will hear a more prominent, privileged narrative of the pre-nineteenth century woman being shared in discussion from some student perspectives. The narrative will typically provide a quick overview of how it seems from surface level observations that she looks like someone who has been saved from a relatively harsher environment, more accomplished than she probably would have been because she now speaks and writes in a new language, and destined to reach the Eternal life of the "new" God she has accepted under "new" circumstances. In courses in which I have taught Phillis Wheatley, discussions of her "pampered"[27] lived experience as a slave and her access to a society with slaves and any benefits that are perceived to come with that do not match the narrative of horror when slavery is more understood to be about the physical body scars. With the initial discussion of narratives such as these and closely related to these, it becomes apparent that pre-nineteenth

[26] Harriet Jacobs wrote *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* which was published in 1861.
[27] In a class discussion on Wheatley, students, when comparing her frontispiece with the image of the *Slave with the Iron Muzzle*, kept describing her experience as "pampered." I continue to find it fascinating that from a contemporary perspective, Wheatley and how she is positioned on the cover of the book of poems she has written still seems to have a relatively "good" experience. Though the students may not have had or known the language that could be used to describe what an experience for Wheatley was probably like, it is still very interesting to see that the narrative of the "good slave experience" still persists. Moments such as this continue to show how necessary, even though at times it is painful, to go back to the archive not just in search of something never before seen or read but to also reconsider the complexities of the experiences documented and left out about pre-nineteenth century slave women.

century slave women have an overarching less wide-ranging shared story and a seemingly hidden personal narrative. It is enough for some readers that there is one woman whose expressions come as enough evidence that slave women have some mental capabilities that make slavery not so bad. Geography, and for some destiny, dictate Wheatley's unique experience. When recovering her work in in the 1970s, the written texts of the slave moves from the margin to change the narratives canonized and privileged.

In order for more eighteenth century slave women to be in conversation with someone like Wheatley, the limitations of Wheatley's life and work as a site must be folded into the conversation of our critical approaches to researching the multiple voices of pre-nineteenth century slave women. Wheatley as a site gives us the confidence that our longing for an pre-nineteenth century slave woman is worth it, but it also shows us the critical challenge a heavy reliance on this site poses for recovering more diverse voices.

Though Wheatley could not gain all that could typically come with fame of some sort, her work and likeness position her in ways that those who enjoyed the fruits of her work wanted to realize. As with the contemporary discussions of Wheatley and her work have shown us, there are "revolutionary implications" of the frontispiece (Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* 101). Wheatley's work and life seems to have been the more open antithesis to the evolving systemic concerns with the complicated idea that the slave be both human and property. As Thomas Jefferson recognizes and articulates in his writings on Wheatley the ambivalence is real. Once the veiled recognition of the humanity of a slave woman like Wheatley is removed, we see as scholars have pointed out, a much more complex woman, who as a result of her actions, voice, and lived experience, is known as one of the foundational pieces of American literature and a huge part of the African diaspora's contribution to world literature.

Authentication

Another limitation of Wheatley as a site is connected to the authentication practices used before the nineteenth century. Wheatley lands "at the center of the late-eighteenth-century debate over the innate intelligence and even humanity of the African" (Carretta, "Introduction" 12). This is evident because authentication devices cover Wheatley's[28] *Poems on Various Subjects*. Her purpose and agency are reigned in with the suggestions that writing for her was just an activity of leisure, "for the Amusement of the Author" (Wheatley 5). The preface for the collection of poems goes on to describe and contain Wheatley's identity:

> The following Poems were written originally for the Amusement of the Author, as they were the Products of her leisure Moments. She had no Intention ever to have published them; nor would they now have made their Appearance, but at the Importunity of many of her best, and most generous Friends; to whom she considers herself, as under the greatest Obligations. (Wheatley 5)

Her agency is stripped because of her non-existent "intention" and placed in the hands of "friends" that she finds herself "under the greatest Obligations." The systemic covering of the works of Phillis Wheatley, who is a wonder to some, reveals the complexity of recovering her as well as using her as a staple site for better understanding the lived experiences of pre-nineteenth century slave women at large. Those controlling the authentication process impose an identity struggle on her work and ensure parameters last for her archival presence. As students and scholars come back to her work, they begin to recognize how those parameters still exist today and influence the ways we view Wheatley, her work, and the story she may have actually shared

[28] Other Wheatleys will be discussed, but when only the last name is in the text, it will be in reference to Phillis Wheatley. All other Wheatleys will have the first and last name included.

underneath all of the definitions of authenticity imposed upon her by others. Her humanity and intelligence do not primarily concern those who judge her and her work.

The preface of her work points the readers to her "Master's Letter" so that he can "sufficiently shew the Difficulties in this Respect she had to encounter" (Wheatley 5). John Wheatley, her master, shares what contemporary readers would have wanted to learn directly from Phillis Wheatley. He does not focus explicitly on her being of African descent as he does share her ability to write without formal education. It seems to be evident in his letter that he embeds her slave identity in this authentication narrative. He writes, "Without any Assistance from School Education, and by only what she was taught in the Family, she in sixteen Months Time from her arrival, attained the English Language, to which she was an utter Stranger before, to such a Degree, as to read any, the most difficult Parts of the Sacred Writings, to the great Astonishment of all who heard her" (Wheatley 7). The act of writing the letter alone bears significance on two levels in Wheatley's case. She is a slave and a woman, and for this time period both markers require authentication for dissemination. With the astonishment of those who are able to hear her read and for her to have done so with no previous experience with the language, this passage signals the challenges slave women who lived in similar societies often encountered. John Wheatley's letter bars in many ways the pathways to the multiple layers of Wheatley's personal experience and makes her a complicated site to consider pre-nineteenth century slave women in a larger context of their own.

What then happens for a slave woman like Phillis Wheatley whose actions show that slaves are in fact humans with particular abilities such as the ability to learn to read and write in a language that is not their first language the narrative shifts to the idea of this slave woman as the exception. However, as we can notice with various approaches, the human qualities exhibited

by Wheatley and other slave women in and out of texts indicate that in terms of lived experience, Wheatley is not the exception, and the ways in which the authentication narrative surrounds her makes it difficult to speak specifically to the multiple experiences of slave women. Technically, she can be considered the exception in the scope of written literature based on the lack of material in the archives, but her ability to learn a new language then read and write in it are not the exception. Because of the slave system and emerging laws that tacked on punishment to those not considered human to read or write, the archive does not provide considerable privileged evidence of the many women enslaved before the nineteenth century who were communicating in the language they learned and in many cases adapted and transformed into new languages in conjunction with those they communicated with most.

The previous two layers of authentication would not be enough for Wheatley's work. Another address to the "Publick" corrals together men considered to be "the most respectable Characters in *Boston*" (Wheatley 8). Their proclamation of authenticity includes:

> WE whose Names are under-written, do assure the World, that the POEMS specified in the following Page,* were (as we verily believe) written by PHILLIS, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from *Africa*, and has ever since been, and now is, under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in a Family in this Town. She has been examined by some of the best Judges, and is thought qualified to write them. (Wheatley 8)

The authentication by the white men ensure that Wheatley can write poetry but cannot do it (Cima 468). These men and their practices "protect" black women, Wheatley here specifically, from becoming an "*individually embodied* public figure outside of that small circle" of privileged men (Cima 472). Those considered honorable in politics, law, religion, and slavery listed their

names below their statement of authentication. Just as products today may come with an authenticity record, Wheatley's current identity as a slave and her historical identity become literally captured in literature impeding on our understanding of her lived experience and limiting our use of her work and her life as a site. Her original work becomes in a sense another way to distinguish the pre-nineteenth century slave woman from the human identity slated only for those deemed worthy of certain gender and race categories. Her nationality and gender are framed for her, and the framing poses challenges for readers to identify the complexity of her lived experience to literally gain freedom of her physical body and also have the freedom to reclaim an identity the seven or eight year old girl had once aspired to have or what the now older woman with a frightening range of experiences would prefer to have. Her poems stand as significant work that without we would be in an even dimmer archive. However, the work to learn more about more enslaved pre-nineteenth century women shows the challenges of Wheatley as a site.

Lived Experience and "Complete" Works

The lack of clear, personal experiences in Wheatley's writing have been initial indicators for some critics and sponsors alike when trying to understand who she is as a person and an artist. There are imposed, whether intentional or not, expectations on her and her writing by those in the eighteenth century and beyond when she is recovered and discussed in the twentieth century. Many have asked questions: Who is she really? What is she telling us about herself in her work? What does she offer us about the climate of her eighteenth century experience? What does it seem she has left out? How do we approach her writings? These questions lead us to her again and again to critically rethink her human experience in an inhumane system and her status as a site for recovery.

Whether seen as a misunderstood poem that reflects Wheatley's singular explicit concern with color or the many other interpretations, "On Being Brought from Africa to America" is the entry point for many in search of the questions that fuel their longing for details about transition and location (Waldstreicher 547). The journey begins somewhere, and this poem points back to a general Africa, a brief stop covered in the religious lingo of her time. It is "pagan" and Christ-less, and these surface level descriptions alone present frustrating evidence exhibiting the challenge of Wheatley as a site for a larger discussion of enslaved women and their multiple lived experiences in the eighteenth century.

Grief, loss, transitions, and location are themes established in Wheatley's writing that have given us information about life before the nineteenth century and experience for her. They also present potential answers to the questions that we long to ask about specific women. Transitions and location found throughout Wheatley's work on the surface and beyond has created many conversations about the journey from the various locales in Africa. One of her most identifiable poems, "On being brought from Africa to America", is as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. describes in his Jefferson lecture, "Mister Jefferson and the Trials of Phillis Wheatley", "the most reviled poem in African American literature" (Gates, "Mister Jefferson and the Trials of Phillis Wheatley"). The opening line "'TWAS mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land" does not appeal to those longing to learn about how a pre-nineteenth century slave woman got to the Americas. As Gates explains, "To speak in such glowing terms about the 'mercy' manifested by the slave trade was not exactly going to endear Miss Wheatley to black power advocates in the 1960s. No Angela Davis she" (Gates, "Mister Jefferson and the Trials of Phillis Wheatley"). No Angela Davis did she need to be. The reception of a poem like this and the desires for the types of answers we really want show the limitations with Wheatley as a site. Alice Walker in her

work “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens” goes back to Wheatley as a site as well and recognizes the “contrary instincts” of Wheatley as a black enslaved woman writer (404). Our contemporary longings, where they may land, impose upon Wheatley an unfair standard which impacts how we consider the multiple voices we work to recover.

Moving beyond the surface of Wheatley’s most recognized poem still shows the challenges of answering questions of location and transition in a more general context of pre-nineteenth century slave women. The brevity of her piece “On Being Brought” could indicate the complications her memory and age bring to this topic. Brought as a young girl on a tumultuous journey, expectations cannot dictate what she knows. What could she remember? If she did, what if the horrors could not be written down? This work seems to point more to her personal experience and the impact it has on her life. It can be extended to a more collective understanding of the pre-nineteenth century transit of terror; however, it may cultivate a more general acceptance that what we need to know about these women’s journeys is that it is devastating and not easily written. Based on the ship logs alone, the range of devastation has many points. Some women die, by suicide, neglect, or at the hands of slave ship captains and workers. “On Being Brought” does not present this aspect of the women’s experiences and shows the other point of limitation for reading slavery through Wheatley’s poetry.

Even within the depth of analysis done on “On Being Brought,” the limitations gather around when the specific questions of location and transit come up. If we do recognize Wheatley as a site of possible coded language with layers that Wheatley herself hoped someone would peel back sooner or later, our re-imagination can move to more creative understandings. As Gates shows by sharing a compelling anagram he received from Walter Grigo, Wheatley may have written what those who understand could one day find. His anagram of the famous poem is:

Hail, Brethren in Christ! Have ye

Forgotten God's word? Scriptures teach

Us that bondage is wrong. His own greedy

Kin sold Joseph into slavery. "Is there

No balm in Gilead?" God made us all.

Aren't African men born to be free? So

Am I. Ye commit so brute a crime

On us. But we can change thy attitude.

America, manumit our race. I thank the

Lord.

As Gates indicates in his reception of this anagram, it is not clear if Wheatley designed a code for her writing, and it is worthy of significance (Gates, “Mister Jefferson and the Trials of Phillis Wheatley”). If anything, hope lives in the re-readings of “On Being Brought” and what we can learn with each new one. However, even with this anagram, specific questions about location and transition would not be answered, especially if the narrative we hope to contribute to is diverse and encompassing.

As indicated earlier with discussions of Jefferson, Wheatley and her work were found "at the center of the late-eighteenth-century debate over the innate intelligence and even humanity of the African" (Carretta, “Introduction” 12). Their humanity hinged on certain traits and connects to the current questions of emotion. Those longing to recover a pre-nineteenth century slave woman want to know how her experience makes her feel. They desire to have the specific thoughts of her feelings that can show what pain and loss meant to her of if she knew any type of joy. Wheatley explores emotions throughout her work, and it serves as evidence for the pre-

nineteenth century reader, if willing to recognize it, that she and other enslaved women are humans.

One of her poems, “On the Death of a Young Lady of Five Years of Age,” includes multiple layers of emotion with possible underlining connections to her personal experience as a young girl. She begins, “FROM dark abodes to fair ethereal light / Th’ enraptur’d innocent has wing’d her flight;” (Wheatley 16). Wrapped in the complex concerns with transition and the emotions of despair and hope, Wheatley’s lines show her ability to not only have emotions but to empathize, something that many pre-nineteenth century leaders did not show her. Her emotions and empathy play a major role in her works because of the overwhelming position she takes on it with the number of poems that focus on grief, loss, and emotions that orbit those. As Brooks shares, "[...] she was able to demonstrate her own capacity for emotional work, contesting racist eighteenth-century notions of African Americans as a people constitutionally incapable of ascertaining certain forms of a feeling - a people whose 'griefs,' as Thomas Jefferson writes, were 'transient,' a people who were categorically 'impassive' or 'dispirited'" (Brooks, “Our Phillis, Ourselves” 15). Wheatley shatters these notions and connects with people for whom these are written.

Wheatley even folds in a familial level with the inclusion of how the emotions of grief and loss impact the family unit. She writes, “This know, ye parents, nor her loss deplore, / She feels the iron hand of pain no more;” (Wheatley 16). Despite Wheatley’s parents being unknown and unlisted in the archives, the consolation for the young girl’s parents does not lack the emotional attention needed in this area. She encourages them and tells them “let then no tears for her henceforward flow,” “Let hope your grief control,” and “Adore the God who gives and takes away;” (Wheatley 16–17). She even prepares them for their reunion:

> Till having sail'd through life's tempestuous sea,
>
> And from its rocks, and boist'rous billows free,
>
> Yourselves, safe landed on the blissful shore,
>
> Shall join your happy babe to part no more. (Wheatley 17)

The emotional weight Wheatley carries in this poem seems to align with the hope she has for herself and her family. To capture the journey of temporary separation and an eternity awaiting the parents and their child comes from a place that Wheatley had to know personally. Once again her work reveals fragments of her desires and understanding of a range of emotions. She could not write about these emotions herself the way she can do it for others. This makes Wheatley's work layered because of her embedded responses, yet it represents what we do not know about her and other eighteenth century slave women. Those whose experiences she writes about get a written record of the more personal moments of their lives while Wheatley is limited in her expressions of her own personal moments. The limitations for Wheatley as a site still remain with the different expectations that each longing and question brings.

After the dedication and before John Wheatley's authenticating letter, the preface states, "With all their Imperfections, the Poems are now humbly submitted to the Perusal of the Public" (Wheatley 5). No one claims, on this page, the ownership of the words. The poems, and by default and design, Wheatley the poet become available to the "public." The seeming absence of Wheatley's personal human experience is striking to many contemporary scholars because that absence is evident in the midst of themes like grief and death that Wheatley is sought after and praised for by those she wrote for and shared her work with. As Joanna Brooks writes in "Our Phillis, Ourselves,"

> For the sentimental literary formulas that allowed the grief of white women to steal the scene while permitting Wheatley to say so little about her own must be counted, finally, like the loss of Wheatley's second manuscript, as losses to literary history itself, asymmetries that more than two hundred years later scholarship is still learning to identify scarcely beginning to comprehend. (Brooks, "Our Phillis, Ourselves" 20)

The system was designed for the "loss of [her] second manuscript" requiring of us scholars the continuous different approaches to begin to comprehend what a pre-nineteenth century slave woman would have wanted us to gather and know about her and her experience. As Brooks recognizes, the "grief of white women" take even more away from what Wheatley shares that had not already been stolen by the various authentication practices.

We do realize that many aspects of Wheatley's lived experience more than likely attributed to her ability to imagine and articulate the sentiments of those she wrote about and for. Carretta suggests that lots of death on the Middle Passage may be why she pays attention to death in her writing (*Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* 10). These may be the experiences that she most wanted to discuss yet recognized the limitations and risks associated with writing about the memories she had of her journey.

Critical analysis helps us understand her active response to an identity foisted upon her and her work and somewhat of an escape plan. As we learn from nineteenth century slaves, an escape plan cannot be plain for all to see. It jeopardizes the slave designing the escape and also all future escape plans. Wheatley's act of writing and work seem to indicate her understanding of her visibility and the consequences of anyone finding out what writing would do for her. With freedom within reach, she seems to have created her escape plan in plain sight, and subsequently leaving for us a complex site for history and literature.

It is not a fluke that Wheatley can empathize to the point that she inserts various themes of loss and grief. Those she wrote for and about did not officially acknowledge Wheatley's capacity for a personal emotional response. As Brooks acknowledges, "How many of the women whose griefs she memorialized dared to acknowledge, let alone mourn, the extent of Wheatley's losses by enslavement or take action to redress them? How many of the white women she consoled in turn consoled her on the deaths of her children? How many of them gathered to commemorate her when she died?" (Brooks, "Our Phillis, Ourselves" 17). How many? That number seems to be very few to none. As Wheatley and her work travelled the waters again, concern for her moving beyond the confines of the enslaved life she had shook the other Wheatleys. As Frances Smith Foster suggests in *Written By Herself*, Wheatley's popularity and exchanges with others such as Benjamin Franklin and dignitaries in England began to break down the strongholds surrounding her (Foster 42–43). Wheatley in her travel to and from England began "what Joseph Roach calls the 'circum-Atlantic' slave trade route, and through the very *visible and embodied* reversal, she forced her white audiences to begin to see her material body, her textual body, and the body of 'that class of Americans called Africans' in a new light" (Cima 476). Those she wrote for and seemed to dedicate work to recognize someone who did not color in the lines set for her. Very few supported Wheatley the woman who married a "proud and ambitious black man" instead of doing missionary work as suggested is clear (Foster 43).

For the most part, readers and scholars understand what Wheatley's poems offer when we identify the lens and ideologies we use. We do not approach with a limited ideological sight because we desire to know what parts of her experience fuel her talent with these poems. The question is no longer about pre-nineteenth century slave women's ability write. Yes, Wheatley and others have left evidence. We also do not question where we may find the early beginnings

of an American literary tradition. Wheatley has been a shining site for this. Her work lays and adds to the foundation of a blueprint that many Americans have had much success embracing. While marginalized, works by enslaved women such as Wheatley stand much more as the lighted pathway – showing the extent to which the center of anything, literature here, only costs.

Questions about the fragments of Wheatley's life continue but have been answered in a few ways. Her talent is recognized with some level of notoriety within the context of her lived experience. As Brooks establishes, "White women appear to have regarded Wheatley as a particularly compelling performer of loss and a purveyor of consolation, perhaps because her elegies consistently mobilize images that are deeply evocative of her own experience of enslavement, such as familial separations, bereaved parents, and ocean transits" (Brooks, "Our Phillis, Ourselves" 11). Beyond the surface of Wheatley's work is where the fragments of lived experience are, and it has more to do with the way she is archived and the time period she is writing. Wheatley performs poems and then they are published with her engraving always making her visible as a slave (Cima 475). Before the nineteenth century there is not space for an enslaved woman to openly share her experience, and she is not even authenticated as such. The questions that spawn from a more general longing for a pre-nineteenth century enslaved woman and her details complicates Wheatley as a site, even more so her poetry. How did she get here? Where is this woman located? What does she have access to? How does she feel? What is her relationship to those around her? Many questions with the pre-nineteenth century slave woman that, depending on who longs for her, call for multiple voices. Wheatley does present what Foster describes as a "personal song and a communal one", yet it is limited when various longings from the wide range of the African diaspora do not feel satisfied with the few presented to them.

Which women have different emotions about loss and familial separation? If we recover different voices, what will they say about their experiences? Speculation carries the questions in various directions, but it is important that it does keep us critically thinking of the multiple experiences. Wendy Anne Warren in her article "'The Cause of Her Grief': The Rape of a Slave in Early New England" shows how the desire to know more about the women and the fragments of their experiences recovered and to be recovered from the archives. She recognizes the "problematic state of surviving evidence" (Warren 1032). It guides and guards the attention given to pre-nineteenth century slave women. Wheatley gives scholars a way to understand and analyze enslaved women's experiences, yet the limitations set around her work still reflect the general emotional concerns of pre-nineteenth century slave women or the more specific conjectures to be made about Wheatley herself.

Much of our longing and expectations come from a desire for memory and how we can use it with our contemporary concerns with the past. In her work "The Site of Memory," Morrison describes her reliance on recollections, both of her own and others, as well as the memories to "access to the unwritten interior life" of people (Morrison, "The Site of Memory" 91–92). She highlights the position that our desires place us in and what the archive does not offer us in direct ways. The keepers of records before the nineteenth century had some level of awareness of the role of recollection and memory that the present played for the enslaved, but for the enslaved women who found themselves in the Americas and with a variety of experiences recording their records in written form did not stand as an option.

Inspired by a conversation with others who did not know of a poem about recollection, Wheatley added to her work the poem, "On Recollection" (Foster 40). She, as Morrison expresses in some ways as part of her process, calls on a muse, signaling how recollection and

memory seem to work. She writes, “Mneme begin. Inspire, ye scared nine, / Your vent’rous *Afric* in her great design” (Wheatley). Part of the process it seems, according to Wheatley, requires the muse in relationship with her “great design” and recognizing this to truly have some form of recollection.

When we begin to ask the more specific questions of what kinds of recollections the enslaved women we long for have and how they might serve our recollections and memories, it is a challenge using Wheatley as a site for multiple voices. She seems to point to the manifold memories when she writes, “The acts of long departed years, by thee / Recover’d, in due order rang’d we see” (Wheatley). Recovery of the past comes together to pull together an order and the power of the forgotten to build through the memories served to those who call upon it. Wheatley does not rely on herself alone in recollection and seems to point to others and what they can inspire and give to those in the present. It may be the blueprint of how she personally recalled her home and family. It may be what drove her creativity in the midst of the paralytic parameters. I argue she points us to “the ample treasure of her secret stores” in order to recognize the many around who can “assist [our] strains” (Wheatley).

We long for a pre-nineteenth century slave woman more like those in the nineteenth century who can embody primary and secondary experiences, interjecting fragments of what they endured, succumbed to, resisted, challenged, and lived. These types of written works and sites work well, because as Caroline Wigginton suggests, they affect the more traditional literary texts when we take a different look at texts where they are found (Wigginton 3). However, "speculation, rather than historical record, leaves a little girl bearing heavy cultural baggage on the Middle Passage" (Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* 9). This

baggage reveals the limitations and challenges with a heavy dependence on Wheatley as a site for those questions that ask for answers about multiple individual experiences.

A shared yet varied experience lies in pre-nineteenth century texts that reveal their presence, both body and identity, and voice. A closer and more deliberate analysis that even recognizes what Wheatley as a site does not move us to be more vigilant in our recovery of texts in order to provide a clearer picture of what the diverse lived experiences of pre-nineteenth century slave women were and better inform the historical narrative surrounding slavery in the Americas. As Moore and Brooks indicate, "[W]e no longer assume that writing in itself is a feminist act: different women experienced different relationships to writing according to their social positions" (31). The women mentioned in texts, inspiring others to write, and writing themselves or in conjunction with each other, can be woven together to see that the experiences of the women extend beyond the women reportedly saved from a heathen place and given a better opportunity for an afterlife outlined by a predominantly Christian religious ideal.

Chapter 2

Traumatic Travel: Traces of Slave Women in the Waters of the Early Americas

"This water tells my story / This water tells it all"

– "Oceans" Jay-Z featuring Frank Ocean[29]

If Phillis Wheatley is nearly silent about her experience on board the *Phillis*, the lingering sounds of Africans' travel experiences that surround the Middle Passage is deafening. Considering that the transatlantic slave trade lasted over 300 years with about 12.5 million forced travellers, the various sounds of their experiences should be loud and clear as they filter through the large waterway of the Atlantic and the records that recall the travel (Davis xvii). This movement of slaves which included the pre-nineteenth century slave women mark what is considered to be "captivity without precedent" (Smallwood 100). This unprecedented captivity found its way onto ships, which travelled over large bodies of water and connected shores for primarily production reasons. With each step in the unprecedented captivity, the sounds of privilege and the mirrored silences of the oppressed leave pieces of the experience. However, these mixtures of privilege and perceived silence gathered from the retrospective views of slaves and former slaves as well as the observant captains and bystanders are often muffled, suffocated, gagged, muted, and suppressed in the throngs of an institution designed to silence the sounds of the suffering humans riding among the waves.

The Middle Passage is physically and metaphorically vast. Linking the Western African shores and the expanding communities on the Eastern shores of the Americas, West Indies, and

[29] Jay-Z's track "Oceans," featuring Frank Ocean, from his latest album *Magna Carta Holy Grail* creates a discussion of history, nature, and storytelling to capture some of the Middle Passage from their contemporary perspectives. With lyrics rejecting some privileged narratives of the slave trade and subsequent experiences related to the trade, Jay-Z seems to point back to the ocean as the primary carrier of the history of slaves and their descendants.

the European coasts, the Middle Passage becomes the involuntary transient beginning for many people from various areas of the African continent. With mainly two separate slave trades – one connecting southwest Africa with Portuguese Brazil by a southern counterclockwise current or circle and the other connection happening with Europe, the Caribbean, and Africa north of the equator in a northern clockwise circle – people representing a diverse collection of communities and tribes began a transatlantic transformation not easily understood with the new people, technologies, and languages thrust upon them (Davis xviii). This powerful pull from the demand to have more captive people for various production and economic support scattered individuals like pre-nineteenth century slave women. The movement through the Middle Passage fragmented their narratives into bits, thrown through the privileged discussions of history, which left work to gather, interpret, and convey the individual experiences with collective connections. The collective connections occur on water and vessels, and though not documented in privileged written accounts and be understood through our understanding of human connection.

In the work to gather, interpret, and convey the experiences of pre-nineteenth century slave women, we are left with recollections and remnants of ships, human cargoes, life and death decisions, and no first person accounts that explicitly focus on the pre-nineteenth century slave women's experiences to try and acclimate contemporary readers, ancestors, historians, and others to an in depth look at the innards of a journey and space, hopefully, to never be replicated to the scale seen on the Atlantic Ocean. Olaudah Equiano, Phillis Wheatley, Belinda, and Chloe Spear are a few of the pre-nineteenth century slaves who find the use of the master's language somewhat amenable to leave fragments of what the journey entailed, and their works fall among the written observations and knowledge of masters, abolitionists, and observers. A mixture of implicit references to a land only known briefly, oftentimes audience-centered textual structures,

and concerns of historical accuracy haunt the use of these texts. My work shows the challenges and flaws when considering their texts as support. The challenges and flaws stem from reasons outside of the survivors'/creators' control. As Kai Tal establishes, the society structures what we privilege with stories – if someone is not at the top of the system, their stories are not always accepted in what is knowledge (14). When dealing with epistemological control, the abovementioned writers carry the flaw of not being authenticated by standards considered important when establishing facts about historical events and personal accounts. For instance, the works of Equiano, Belinda, and Spear have all been in question in terms of who actually wrote them or if these authors, particularly in Equiano's case, experienced what has been included. Belinda's petition to the court has been connected with Prince Hall and Phillis Wheatley as potential writers, and this creates a dilemma in what is considered her agency in writing and expression (Belinda). Spear's memoir is an as-told-by piece, and it is not even clear who actually authors the details of her story. The Lady in Boston receives credit for the story of Spears life, and in brackets, "Rebecca Warren Brown" is inserted with a question mark.[30] To add to what

[30] Vincent Carretta discusses the possibility that Olaudah Equiano created his African identity and his experiences with the Middle Passage. He establishes that his work may be more of a "historical fiction" rather than his narrative. He also shares a baptismal record found in February 1759 and naval records in 1773 saying he was born in South Carolina. For the purposes of my dissertation project, since this is still a highly contested interpretation of fragmentary historical evidence, I will treat Equiano's work as an authentic narrative providing essential information about an African society and the Middle Passage that we would not have known of had it not been for his contribution. For more information on the Equiano controversy, read Carretta's *Equiano the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man*, particularly pages xiv-xvi; 2. For a side-by-side analysis of the debate over Equiano, see Brycchan Carey's "Where was Olaudah Equiano Born?"- http://www.brycchancarey.com/equiano/nativity.htm - and more information in his article, "Olaudah Equiano: African or American?" published in *1650-1850: Ideas, Æsthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era*, Volume 17. Belinda's Petition could have been written by Prince Hall or Phillis Wheatley. Gay Gibson Cima discusses Wheatley as Belinda's amanuensis. Additional information can be found in Cima's "Black and Unmarked: Phillis Wheatley, Mercy Otis Warren, and the Limits of Strategic Anonymity". Chloe Spear's memoir could have been written by one of two people: Mary Webb, or, as scholar Lois Brown

seems the mystery of the author, Spear's memoir is not as widely read and discussed as the other works discussed in this project.

Wheatley endures a more visible authentication process, covering her work with the signed names of several white men. She writes her work, but the weight of the authentication process still impacts the approach from contemporary positions. While no historical piece of work is ever fully authenticated by scholars or audiences alike, pre-nineteenth century slaves, and even more so with slave women, have works that have to combat expectations and privileges of what is considered authentic. What seems to be a silence is much more like a societal, systemic flaw that once overcome can lead to a more diverse, inclusive narrative. Nevertheless, the pieces of sound, descriptions, and records of travelling conditions and experiences work together to create an imperfect nouveau narrative concerning pre-nineteenth century slave women.

The desire for the pre-nineteenth century woman's narrative leaves us little compared to the privileged, traditional perspectives from the oppressors. Their standards impede upon the women's experience during this transformative journey and leaves questions unanswered. This desire to know more of their human history in a more comprehensive and complex way allows the interdisciplinary approach to lend sources that do not fit the privileged recovery process and analytical approaches often found in literary studies. What we can learn with the facts is that pre-nineteenth century slave women existed and travelled on vessels commonly known as slave ships. All of them had previous lives that involved communities, cultural traditions, and even the things many of us in contemporary positions often take for granted like a name, a language, a voice, a family, and a community. However, the journey across the waters of the Middle Passage

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believes, Rebecca Warren Brown. For more information, see Lois Brown's "Memorial Narratives of African Women in Antebellum New England".

transformed them into property, and a process that renamed them reset their language to fit the communication style of their masters and positioned them in the historical narrative as overwhelmingly silent and lost, according to the standard communication forms of their masters. However, though they seem silenced from a first person perspective, they still can be found in documentation of ship ledgers and descriptions as well as better understood with the layout of the ship. I use these sources to provide more information about what the experiences of slave women could have been like as they were transformed on the slave ships crossing the large, unknown body of water.

Slave ships become recognizable signs of certain change and indicative of a much clearer site of the transportation linked to beginnings of the transformation of the individual woman to the commodified slave. For pre-nineteenth century slave women, the mysterious nature of the multilayered journey of captivity led them to the shores of the major body of water where they were stored in dungeons of slave forts and castles. The experience would get stranger at the first sight of the slave ships on whatever coast the enslaved women would be taken. This early picture of mystery that a slave like Equiano paints in his narrative definitely provides an important perspective to consider. As noticed in Equiano's narrative, slaves who reached various shores on the African continent found a moment where canoes lining a bank provide a shocking contrast to the much larger vessels that did not dent the endless water (Equiano 38). This pivotal moment stands as a piece of the slave women's experience where the range of reactions and emotions may have all been rooted in the similar first reactions that Equiano expresses.

Scraps seem like a more appropriate term to use when thinking what the texts I have scavenged offer considering how large the water, many of the ships and their records, and the movement of the forced travellers are. However limited the textual markers may be, linking them

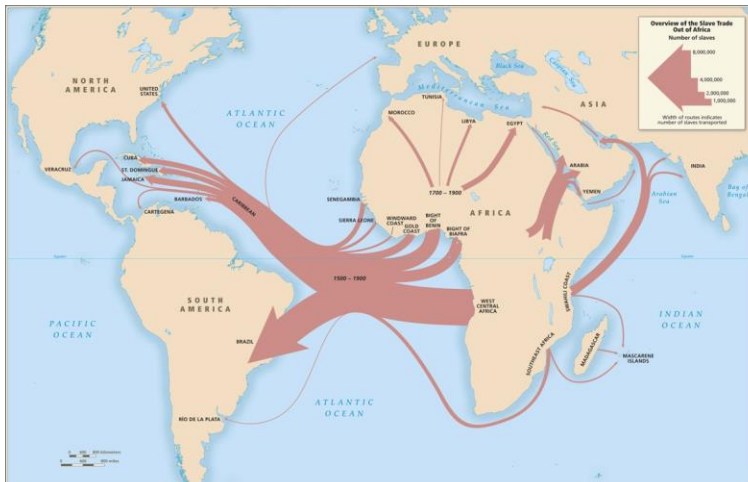

Figure 3. Overview of the slave trade out of Africa, 1500 – 1900; David Eltis and David Richardson; "Introductory Maps"; *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*; Emory University, 2009; Web. 12 Nov. 2012.

to the landscape of the water, zooming in on the structure of the ships, and considering the transformation of the women corralled aboard the vessels reveal why the search to learn much more about their experiences and how we negotiate and re-imagine them is difficult, but not impossible. A better comprehension of the personhood to property transformation can be done by combining the attention to physical steadiness of the water, the material of the ships and records, and the details of the recollection of those who survived to tell of the journey.

The Water

As the map in Figure 3 of the slave trade movement from 1500 – 1900 vividly shows, the Atlantic Ocean provided a passageway for which millions of people from the African continent found their journey moving in an unimaginable direction. James Campbell notes that by the 1730s about 3000 people were being shipped out per year (2). This waterway is a pivotal piece of the narrative of those who travelled it with chosen or forced uncertainty. As Saidiya Hartman puts it, it was "the death canal in which 'the African died to what was and to what could have been'" (*Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* 103). It held "floating worlds" referenced by many brought from the interior of the African continent and contributed to what seemed to be an endless unknown (Belinda). In unimaginable ways, the water also contributes to the story of the pre-nineteenth century slave women who had once been known as many, individual women who emerged on foreign shores of the Atlantic as seemingly one type

of property. She becomes a stranger no longer connected to kin or country, no longer valued and honored for her character (Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* 5). Waves lap with what may have been the last remnants of the known personhood of the women who become slaves before the nineteenth century. The ocean's massive dimensions led those left to wonder about the belief, specifically in the case of specific African communities such as the Fula, that death must have met them as they had been eaten or murdered because "none ever returned" (Campbell 8).

No one, but the water, as Jay-Z indicates, can speak legitimately and recognizably of some of things that may have happened during the transformative and traumatic transatlantic journey. Even with that idea, nature speaks in different ways that make it a little more difficult to incorporate; however, the allusion to the location of the disempowered experiences of the slaves in transport speaks to the enormity of the experience as well as the invalidated shared experiences. The slave lacks agency from this aspect of the written texts that focus on the experiences of those who are moving parts of the slave system such as ships, slave captains, crews – all who become a part of the machine that established a complicated American slave system. The water, as Edwidge Danticat suggests, is one of the final places before their final steps in their transformation from an individual woman to the collective commodity of pre-nineteenth century slavery. Danticat writes, "The past is full of examples when our foremothers and forefathers showed such deep trust in the sea that they would jump off slave ships and let the waves embrace them. They too believed that the sea was the beginning and the end of all things, the road to freedom and their entrance to Guinin[31]" (Danticat). While Danticat references more

[31] Danticat describes Guinin as a "peaceful land […] where gods and goddesses live." Danticat has more of an ancestral perspective as she thinks of women and slavery. She specifically refers

specifically a spiritual belief that many held as they were carried against their will across the large body of water, she does provide a viewpoint of this body of water being sacred and full of the stories we do not have at the center of the privileged narrative of slavery. As many scholars suggest, these stories do exist. At this point, how we understand them and learn about them comes from the ways in which we have approached them and continue to approach them.

The trust, as Danticat suggests, is in the water that led the enslaved to at times jump in for their lives, which the enslaved communicated with in ways that language, as we see in written texts, cannot adequately wrap its terms and definitions around. The water that knows and understands the travel experience of many men, women, and children does not have a structural text. The sounds it makes, and the way we understand its sometimes-tumultuous nature is difficult. However, it is where the movement is continuous and the transformation happens individually and collectively. As Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina establishes, the multiple forms of movement in the early black Atlantic is “international, transoceanic and coastal” among many things (42). In the earlier map, we see the wide-ranging yet restricting movement that carried eighteenth century slave women abroad. The ships and the women’s experiences on them are strong indicators of the complex experiences that cannot be conveyed in a holistic way, but the rumination of the fragments left behind help build onto the work that already has helped us in our contemporary positions have better awareness and education about pre-nineteenth century slavery generally, and pre-nineteenth century slave women more specifically.

The curiosity surrounding the water element leads me to consider certain questions. What does the movement of the water add to the environment the women were subjected to? What does this water feel like to women who had not been on such a large body of water before? What

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to the experiences of women who encountered the French and Spanish and who were forced to live in slavery in the specific area now known as Haiti.

is left in and on the waters once the women have landed and become the official property of their masters? What type of emotional bondage does the constant contact with the water that they know connects but separates them from their home cause? How does this water specifically impact the transformations they undergo while being forced to travel over it? While these questions I pose would be difficult to answer because the individual slave women's experiences are complex, they do inform what I consider and how scholars and researchers have approached understanding the water and its role in the Middle Passage.

This water carrying so many parts of this unprecedented captivity represents somewhat of a neutral part of the experience. The water cannot be manipulated by the slave captains and crewmembers who built their roles on control, and though the water is vast and unknown, the slaves seemed to recognize the inability of their new masters to control the water with any amount of certainty. For instance, some slave women's actions on the water show their confidence in the uncertain condition the water placed the men in control of them in. Jonathan Dickinson in his journal describes one of his slave women's conduct when travelling with the men she was entrusted to after their shipwreck. He writes, "My Negro woman named Sarah, having beaten and abused a girl named Quenza, being reproved often by him and Robert Barrow, she therefore abused them in an extraordinary manner; whereupon Joseph struck her with his paddle" (Dickinson 67). Sarah, according to Dickinson, had been on both ends of physical encounters, and while travelling via the water, she seizes the opportunity to abuse the men who had often "reproved" her. Hugh Crow documents in his memoir women who also seem to recognize the lack of control by the captain and crew. He writes, "One morning, two Eboe women, who attended the cook, by some means got overboard to swim ashore" (Crow 39).

Though the women do not survive, according to Crow, the two take a risk that the water makes available to them.

The water becomes a major part of this journey, because for some of the women it is the tangible unknown. With a coverage of approximately 41,105,000 square miles and making up about 20 percent of the earth's surface, it must have been a huge sign that may have brought to life the fears and uncertainty felt by the slave women ("How Big Is the Atlantic Ocean?"). As researchers considering ways to develop and complicate how we think of pre-nineteenth century slave women and their experiences from a contemporary experience, the Atlantic Ocean[32] provides a prominent site for the Middle Passage and experiences of many pre-nineteenth century slave women being carried to various portions of the Americas from the West African coast. Scientifically, how the Atlantic Ocean is discussed and the findings and facts since before the nineteenth century have advanced, but the nature of the water remains the same: unpredictable.

One part of the unpredictable nature of water would be the waves. The waves would be an element that the women could not escape. From the Africans' point of view, Charles Joyner describes the Middle Passage and how the water was seen and felt. He answers, "Every time the waves came you could see them and prepare for them, you slid across these unsanded floors" (PBS). Whether the waves are a relief is not clear. The movement of and as a result of the waves could have caused seasickness. The water may have been cooling but may have also been a sting to any open wounds, so the uncertainty of the water may have been tied to pain. With the pain

[32] A small number of Africans captured in the east would have also traveled the Indian Ocean in addition to the Atlantic Ocean. This is important since I have an interdisciplinary and fragmentary approach to learning about pre-nineteenth century slave women. For this project, I will focus primarily on the Atlantic Ocean as it is the site of travel for the people and texts I have discussed.

and vast uncertainty of the water providing somewhat of a textual aspect of the experiences of the women, and it also complicates the more readily imagined knowledge of a more static fear or apathy. Those writing about experiences on the water capture the uncertainty of the water and the vulnerability they seem to be subjected to when travelling on it. This impacts the ways in which they fill the ships and work to maximize the amount of human cargo packed into the ships and chances taken on such perilous journeys.

The unpredictable nature of the water also contained unknowns and housed layers that many aboard the ship feared. The confusion and concern surrounding the journey along with the water created dark barriers for the enslaved women's experiences. The slave captains understood this and would use the dangerous nature of the water to continue to add to the unrest the enslaved already had, especially since getting aboard the ship. Marcus Rediker in his work on the slave ship discusses one of the ways this is done. He writes, "Slaving captains consciously used sharks to create terror throughout the voyage. They counted on sharks to prevent the desertion of their seamen and the escape of their slaves during the long stays on the coast of Africa required to gather a human 'cargo'" (Rediker 39). While the slave captains and crews could not control the water, their knowledge and experience with the water seemed to be used to control and manipulate the enslaved who found themselves in elements and around animals that seemed just as foreign if not more than the white men they encountered for the first time upon reaching areas near the African shore. Understanding how the water and its inhabitants tightened the space for the enslaved women reveals more about the complicated experiences that we do not typically get from one text. Questions of why many of the women chose to stay aboard the ship or grappling how and why some of these women risked or took their lives on the water become a little clearer. If the women are seeing or just hearing about and imagining an animal like a shark for the first

time while dealing with the confined spaces of the ship, sticking out the journey may have seemed like the best option. While for others who may have found death more appealing, their decision lies in a perspective that complicates what we understand about how the journey must have felt for them to leave the confined space for the dangers of the water and what it held.

The loss, unpredictable elements of the journey, and the dangers of what the water held beyond the waves posed a challenge for all of the slaves involved. The women have an interesting loss, both now and then, because of the rank of less desirability in the human market and a seeming erasure that occurs on the larger landscape of the pre-nineteenth century slave systems. Equiano reveals in his narrative a moment once he had experienced the wide water from the West African shores to the next shores that signals the separate gendered experiences and narrative gap for enslaved women. He writes, "I now totally lost the small remains of comfort I had enjoyed in conversing with my countrymen; the women too, who used to wash and take care of me, were all gone different ways, and I never saw one of them afterwards" (Equiano 43–44). The important role of the women in Equiano's young life at this key moment in the journey shows strength, care, and connection valued by Equiano and those who came from similar community groups who valued the same connection. The "different ways" these women headed towards show the fragmented nature of slave women's experiences and signal places that need to be explored to better understand the varied experiences of these women. Also it is a place to consider how they vanish and reappear somewhere along the journey and ways they are mentioned in some capacity, such as narrative moments in Equiano's work or pieces listed among the water, which still exists.

The records of the travel experiences do provide some ideas about the Middle Passage experience that are hard to argue against: it is dangerous. The water and the associated weather

show no favor – it does not care about the construction of race and discrimination being built. It, in a sense, removes the categories emerging through this act of travel and trade, and it humanizes the women in ways that they have not been humanized through the capture and travel to the shore. The water complicates the pieces of the women's experiences we work to better understand. While they are typically being dehumanized on this second leg on the journey to becoming a commodity, their humanity fights to stay alive. When ships wreck killing all aboard, the bottom of the ocean where they perish does not separate and save. Those thrown over board, despite whatever spiritual, religious, or karmic beliefs, become human again when the literal and figurative chains of bondage are released by death. As this chapter works to show, the water, the ship, the pieces of records, narratives, documents and poetry all work together to provide various pictures of what some of the earliest experiences may have been like and impact the ways in which we build our conversations surrounding gendered experiences in pre-nineteenth century slavery.

"Sailing Lady"[33]

The water carries many of the moving parts of the institution of slavery. As a key symbol, the ship itself presents an interesting site where major transformations occur on the journey through the Middle Passage. Those who came to understand its presence on the various shores of the Atlantic Ocean knew what the arrival of this vessel meant and often prepared for it. Stephanie Smallwood considers the ship and what its arrival signaled. She writes, "When there was no specific need to off-load large numbers of war captives, it was the arrival of ships that triggered the flow of people toward the water's edge" (Smallwood 80). The ship is a site where

[33] In "Oceans," the term "sailing lady" is used to allude to ships.

the essential movement of kidnappers, traders, and the enslaved intermingled to create what would later be known as a massive movement of human cargo that had not been seen before.

Eighteenth century writers reveal the heavy influence of the ship on the enslaved. These writers' descriptions become the limited views yet established truths of the Middle Passage experiences of pre-nineteenth century slave women. The ship stands prominent, and those with an enslaved experience on the vessel as it moves over the powerful waters have no voice that fits in the privileged accepted written word of the oppressors with which this moment can be articulated without the need for authentication.

Olaudah Equiano in his narrative describes the ship as a foreign contraption that he works to reconcile with the other alien encounters he has. At first look, we understand from Equiano's account that the ship stood to be astonishing and terrifying (Equiano 38). He longed to learn more about the ship that would be a mystery for he and the many women captured and led to this point. He documents, "I asked how the vessel could go? They told me they could not tell; but that there were cloths put upon the masts by the help of the ropes I saw, and then the vessel went on; and the white men had some spell or magic they put in the water when they liked in order to stop the vessel" (Equiano 40). The Lady of Boston suspected of recounting Chloe Spear's experience uses the term "floating prison" to describe the ship: "her sails are bent, and she bears them from Africa's romantic wilds, never to return. The spot, however, from whence they were stolen, is still a part of this 'dim speck call'd earth,' and will testify against the perpetrators of the dreadful deed" (A Lady of Boston 15). Despite both of these texts being surrounded by controversy regarding authenticity for different reasons, they both evoke a vessel received at first sight by new slaves as the place of bondage shrouded in mystery and foreign to what they have known about slavery and the value of slaves. The women become somewhat like the ships they

fear – bent and never to be returned as the people they once were. The exploration of the physical nature of the ship provides a better context for the contemplation of pre-nineteenth century slave women's experiences.

Pre-nineteenth century slave ships come in a range of sizes all depending on variables such as owner's specifications, amount of goods for trade, and the number of human cargo expected to return. *Susannah*, one of the earliest vessels documented in the eighteenth century to have landed and disembarked slaves in the Americas and commandeered by Captain George Dew, had a tonnage of 125 and a standard tonnage of 89.[34] Though these numbers are not to be taken as the true measurement for this ship, these estimated numbers derived from the British measurement system provide a start to understand the size and its relation to the experience of those enslaved (Eltis). At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the *Susannah* represents a particular size vessel that has 46 slaves disembarked in some location in the Americas on the eighth of August in 1700. Of the 52 slaves embarked, 51.1% were female, an interesting majority for a slave trade that planned to gather mostly men (Voyages Database). Size of the vessel and the number of human cargo that can fit were of importance for the slave captains and investors. The indication of tonnage can seem a bit difficult to grasp, and that is not uncommon because ship building and other specifications during this time, and in general, is seen as a special skill set requiring those with the talent to build ships for the slave trade. In Liverpool around 1750, shipbuilders began to "custom-build" the slave vessels (Rediker 53). This act of specialized transportation for strange cargoes signals the outward symbol of enslavement and the diasporic movement and transformation of humans to cargo. Pre-nineteenth century and specifically

[34] For more information on tonnage and how the measurement is used in *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, David Eltis discusses how this information is used for research purposes and goes into more detail about the British measurement system that these numbers are derived from.

eighteenth century slave women found themselves on these ships in contained positions that had been modified with the commodification of their bodies in mind. The horrifying approach to the design for the vessels for this movement can be seen as pieces of understanding about the conditions many of the pre-nineteenth century slave women encountered, and through this understanding continue to build more complicated narratives about their experiences and what it means in the larger context of slavery and ways in which it is recovered, imagined, and re-imagined.

In the recovery of what we know about the ships and what role they play in the pre-nineteenth century women's experiences in the Middle Passage, the success of the voyage reveals important details. Though there is a point where the shipbuilding and ship renovation for the slave trade becomes more commonplace, it was not indicative of a successful arrival to the coasts for trade and sale. Not all ships make it to their destinations as anticipated, adding another layer of consideration for the experiences of pre-nineteenth century slave women who found themselves on these carriers. One of the earliest documented ships in the eighteenth century, *John and Mary,* does not have what the owners, captain, and crew would consider a successful voyage. Documented as having shipwrecked due to some natural disaster, approximately 404 slaves perished after being embarked (Voyages Database). This vessel became the last place for the lives of the humans turned cargo, and this vessel becomes the last documented piece of their existence since the human cargoes were accounted for in a ledger or record book once taken aboard. A shipwreck of this size also provides another angle to consider what pre-nineteenth century slave women could have been subjected to on the forced journey. It seems that nothing is left, but this documentation alone shows the existence that counteracts the idea of there being nothing and absolute silence. Within a database it becomes a signal of existence, in a sense

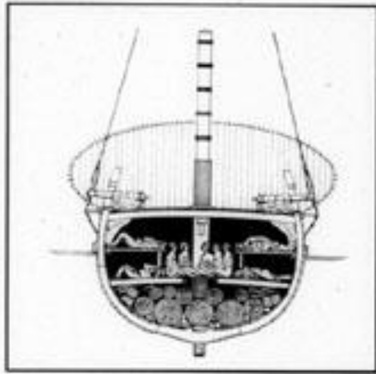
calling for our contemporary scholarship and research to remember and reflect on the moments, though fragmented, that the pre-nineteenth century slave women who endured this experience. The lack of documented, privileged written word from one of the women's personal point of view does not give us the immediate fact of the presence of women on the ship of the specific terror, relief, or the various emotions that may exist between those.

The successfulness of the trip does seem to inherently call for a more particular look at the build of the ship and how the design informs us of the conditions that may have been part of eighteenth century women's experiences beyond the water and the trip. Captain Henry Munday and the owners of the *John Hopewell,* Henry Smith, Brooke Houlditch, John Scott, Richard Watts, and Petit, may have been pleased with this 334 day voyage, which includes their journey to the African coast, their stay on the coast to conduct purchases of slaves, and their Middle Passage journey, especially if the number of enslaved that embarked and sold when they made it to the Americas. The *John Hopewell* makes it to Maryland with 320 slaves, 80 less than originally started the journey, and the tonnage is 130 and standard tonnage is 236 (Voyages Database). Considering the numbers themselves fuels astounding ideas about the space and how human cargo, like enslaved women, were placed in these spaces. Before 1714, the Royal African Company carried 330 persons on average, or 2.3 slaves per ton (Smallwood 71). This standard helps us think of how the *John Hopewell* represents a level of containment that really shows the ways in which slave captains hoped to maximize their trips to trade for slaves. With an emphasis on success, the need for an extended capacity was necessary to get the most of the trade they made and to bring back as many human cargo as possible (Smallwood 70). The more slaves on the ship the better the success rate from the perspective of the slave owners and captains. The physical structure of the ship suggests not only what the conditions needed to be

like for the owners' and captains' personal endeavors but what the conditions were for the enslaved women packed in like products into the bellies, corners, decks, and other extended capacities.

Slave ships represent the power dynamics and confinement of the transformative journey of the Middle Passage and thinking of more modern ideas to reveal the conditions seem to help with the ways in which these pieces come together for a more complex idea of the enslaved women's experiences. If a slave ship was seen as "wide-ranging [and] well-armed [… it] was a powerful sailing machine, and yet it was something more [...] It was also a factory and a prison, and in this combination lay its genius and horror" (Rediker 44). The notion of production and the restricted space of a prison combine to show what the numbers with tons to slave ratios cannot. It becomes clearer that many of the eighteenth century slave women found themselves fitting into spaces typically not even large enough for their body size. Those working on these slave ships could not even consider the vessels to have had any types of comfort. Sailors referred to the slave ship as a prison, and as Rediker writes, "imagine how it seemed to a slave locked belowdecks for sixteen hours a day or more" (Rediker 45). Those with better access to space and movement on the vessels felt a level of confinement that created a comparison to one of the least favorable places to be. This notion of a prison shows on one hand the humanity of the cargo the slave captains and crew acquired on the shores of Western Africa, and on the other hand shows the ways in which a human perspective adds a different outlook on the slave ship. From outside the ship, it seems grand and powerful yet small in the midst of the larger water. However, once on it, it becomes small and binding. This sense of bondage ironically extended to the crew and therefore made it clearer that for the enslaved women, the ship may have seemed like a prison or worse. For those travelling along the Middle Passage, "The slave ship was also a mobile,

seagoing prison at a time when the modern prison had not yet been established on land" (Rediker 45).



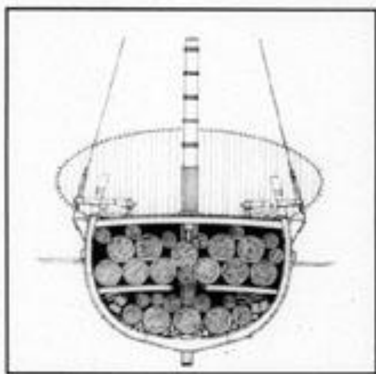


Figure 4. *Slave Ship Henrietta Marie, 1700;* Image Reference F03; as shown on www.slaveryimages.org, compiled by Jerome Handler and Michael Tuite, and sponsored by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and the University of Virginia Library.

When considering the construction of a slave ship, the *Henrietta Marie* is an interesting example. The *Henrietta Marie* is a slave ship found in the Atlantic Ocean by a team of divers off of the coast of Key West and is "the only identified merchant-slave ship found in the Americas to have sunk in the course of the slave trade" (Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Society 5–6).[35] With three masts, the vessel is described as having a square stern and an approximate keel length of 60 feet (Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Society 7). This vessel has been recreated as a replica for an exhibition tour for a museum. This interesting recreation points to the varied experiences in trade and travel of slaves before the nineteenth century. While speculations can be made about whether the little we know of the Middle Passage journey experience is authenticated or not through literary accounts of those who experienced them, the ships' physical experience can reveal what it could have been like and fill in a small portion unfilled by the less authenticated, from a literary or historical perspective of standards, experiences that do not fill in the way that certain privileged works allow scholars to support their work.

[35]The team of divers and archaeologists found the ship in 1972. For more information on Mel Fisher, his team of divers, and the exhibition tour of the *Henrietta Marie*, check out the prospectus of the exhibition tour.

The drawing above and to the left of the *Henrietta Marie* shows the interchangeable nature of the way the ship could carry all types of goods and be converted to carry human cargo. The ship's conversion from housing products to carrying humans turned slaves considered property, shows a transformation of the slave women and the impact the travel has on them. This shows, as indicated earlier, how the remodeling of ships becomes part of the ways ship owners and captains worked to maximize their trade trips. These physical changes to ships can indicate danger and the nature of the travel and how it transforms the women on the ships. It is clear that the ship is not human and does not speak, but considering the ways the ship's physical appearance can and has been altered is indicative of the slave women's experiences. While the ship is not the first and only place these women found themselves while in bondage, it is the pivotal place of transformation from a human to an enslaved human to an enslaved human being molded into a commodity. The ship's body does provide information to consider when thinking of the travel environment for the slave women. It also seems to provide a perspective of a product controlled by someone like the shipbuilder, slave captain/owner to think about how that mentality has been transferred over to the women traded for goods that could never be equivalent – natural resources that do not have the same characteristics of the human species. No matter how gendered the language surrounding the ship with female pronouns and names, the female slaves could never become the product the slave captains and crews wanted them to be.

Though the women could not become the object that the slave ship represents and the products it carried, the slave captains and crew still worked to change the women. The women's bodies begin to be manipulated as these ships were manipulated. Positioning their bodies, restricting their movements, and challenging their mental capacity still did not make them like the material object, *Henrietta Marie,* and all other ships that these women were forced upon. The

methodical and rational ways in which slave captains/owners worked to create a vessel that would provide the space and malleability needed to bring as much human cargo as possible back to various ways did not translate to the women's bodies in the same ways, showing the humanity is non-transferrable whether considering the ships or the women. When the *Henrietta Marie* is found at the bottom of the ocean, she leaves behind remnants of what she once looked like and what she had once carried. However, the many slave women that perished on the slave ships they found themselves on and thrown overboard, they do not leave behind the specifics and pieces of who they are and what the journey meant to them specifically, like this symbolic vessel. They could not have been expected to. The slave women, no matter how much the slave owners/captains and crew worked to make them products to be traded and sold, would never be manipulated in the same ways as an inanimate object like the slave ship. On the other hand, no matter how much the language surrounding the slave ship nodded to an object that could seem like a life-bearing woman, it would not be so. The remains of the *Henrietta Marie* show this because only the materials of what this ship was made of can leave behind the pieces that it has and provide some specifications to consider when the recreation began. Putting the ship back together again can be somewhat of an easier task and adds to our understanding of experiences on the ship, just as it can be possible for any object that can be recovered. However, the recovery process for the pre-nineteenth century slave women has not been and will not be the same as that of the *Henrietta Marie*. Many of the women are not named and that is an indication alone that the recovery process has a different path. The women who found themselves at the bottom of the ocean as did ships like the *Henrietta Marie* do not get the reconstruction and exhibition as the ships do because despite the work done to turn these women into property; their demise reminds us that they are humans with experiences and stories that property cannot have. Though their

bones may exist somewhere at the bottom of the ocean, privileged documentation does not exist to capture the human experiences that they had.

The *Henrietta Marie* is still located at the bottom of the ocean along with the remains, or memories, of many slaves that are at times documented as jumping overboard, being thrown overboard after dying, or drowning when the ship sank. The descriptions of the water becomes central as another portion to be added to areas where literature does not speak the unadulterated first person experiences of pre-nineteenth century slave women, but the facts of its state will hopefully give another distinct aspect to consider when trying to create, imagine, and reimagine what it could have been like for the female slaves.

Working with the artifacts and records of this particular portion of the forced journey continue to help us think through questions that help us better understand a more complex narrative of the enslaved pre-nineteenth century women. What does the ship have to show about the travel of the women who survived? What condition are the ships found in as they move about the passageway connecting shores of landmasses at odds with each other before it becomes comprehensible? With limited “authenticated” narratives of the slave women’s experience on water, the details of the concrete artifacts become imperative parts of a complete story we do not have access to at this time. The loss that occurs even on the ship stands as evidence of lives and narratives that existed and can be better understood with continued focus and recovery efforts of what the experiences of the enslaved women mean to our understanding and how we educate ourselves and others on the individual experiences of the slave system impacted by constructions such as gender and race. Ship ledgers even provide the sometimes methodical discussion of the number of human cargo aboard and the “major events” that occur, such as revolts and deaths.

Typically, the cargo hold areas of these slave ships were too small and narrow for the number of slaves that were placed on them. Many of these vessels averaged three hundred or more in these small spaces and the additional "long, flat surfaces formed by the decks" needed to be added to in order to make the surface larger in order for the trip be a "success" (Smallwood 69–70). This "success" hinged on the indescribable containment of pre-nineteenth century slave women whose experiences must continue to be complicated by the continuous research of the conditions to put together the fragments for a more complex narrative.

These more complex narratives also help us better understand better known pre-nineteenth century women like Phillis Wheatley whose forced journey begins in Africa. The Brigantine vessel that she shares a name with carried her and 95 other slaves to Massachusetts where only 75 of them landed on July 11, 1761 at this first place since leaving the African shore. Peter Gwinn, the ship's captain, and eight crewmen were also aboard the *Phillis* (Voyages Database). This portion of Wheatley's "improbable journey" could have gone another way (Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* 1). Ninety six slaves were reported in the count for the number of slaves on trip when the *Phillis* began the voyage back to the Americas but only 75 of them actually arrive in Massachusetts, the first stop (Voyages Database). The shift in numbers documented reveal that the above focus on the ship size and conditions impacted the experience of the young girl we would come to know as Phillis Wheatley. This ship like the many others used during the transatlantic slave trade show how they were designed as containment units to carry "goods." Unfortunately, some of the "goods" they contained in every space they could create and extend were human. Who the enslaved were, particularly the women in the case of my focus, have to fight in an unknown territory inside of a vessel with a level of containment only fit for cargo. The ship becomes the place for the

transformation of individual women to the perception of them as commodities that took reign of their narratives. The *Phillis* represents this type of confined prison for four documented round trips from the Americas to the West African coast (Voyages). It is the descriptions and ideas of the *Phillis* that shows the interdisciplinary work that builds for a more complex narrative of pre-nineteenth century slave women, and in this case Phillis Wheatley. The ship itself allows us to approach Wheatley's life and work with more complicated questions, asking of her experience a much deeper consideration of how she lived and what her words mean in the context of that information.

Women's Experiences on the Transatlantic Slave Market

Ship owners did not desire too many women be part of a new shipment of human "cargo" yet the slave women represented an interesting dilemma with those in the trade. Timothy Fitch, the owner of the *Phillis,* is clear in a letter to the Peter Gwinn, captain of the ship, that he wanted there to be few women and girls. He writes to Gwinn,

> Touching first at Sinagall. & there dispose of as much of your Cargo as you can to Advantage for Cash or Prime Slaves & then Proceed Down the Coast to such Places as you may Judge the moSs Likely to dispose of your Cargo & Slave Your VeSsell as you'l be very Barley upon the Coast you are not to take any Children & Especilly Girls, if you Can Avoid it by any means, + as fiew Woman as PoSsible […]. (Fitch)

Intentions seem to be clear that girls and women should not be the main human slaves the captains should concern themselves with when trading. This shows the climate already set for pre-nineteenth century women. The women and girls who would find themselves in the midst of the slave owners' human value system designed to transfer them into commodities.

The women's value on the market did not seem to be much based off of exchanges such as those similar to Fitch's. Building a free labor force for many like Fitch meant more demand for male slaves instead of women, but the women's value meant something, particularly from the perspective of Africans and their market dynamics – even if just the ease of accessibility to them. As Smallwood outlines:

> Women were more valuable than men on the African market for slaves but women were also easier both to obtain and to dispose of. The productive and reproductive capital they represented was the primary concern of kinship institutions, and women circulated with relative frequency and ease in the exchange networks that framed kinship relations. Moreover, women did not present the threat to security that male captives posed, and as easily as they could be incorporated into urban domestic households or village compounds as wives and agricultural laborers, they could be released at a moment's notice when lucrative opportunity arose. (83–84)

The ambivalent approach to the enslaved women's value seems to create a dichotomy of some sort where slave women appeal to the captors because of the accessibility. However, those travelling to trade for them did not have the same ideas about their value and how they would fit among the "cargo" they hoped to obtain. Though the Middle Passage experience is not for anyone, especially those being held captive, the women who found themselves forced into this experience were often not at the top of traders' lists.

These women often emerged in the records of the ships highlighting the impact the experience had on them, though not often in the mind of slave owners and captains who planned their transatlantic trade. On the *Sally*, a female slave committed suicide, found hanging "between decks" bringing the total captive deaths to two (*Voyage of the Slave Ship Sally*). A woman

considered “all Most dead” is left with the ship’s translator. Women and girls are documented as dying on average at least one every other day. Those who did not die but witnessed the loss while on the journey had to have been influence in some way, and the consideration of these moments are missing pieces that help structure better discussions of their experiences. When contemplating the evidence that nods to the women’s existence in such conditions, questions come up: What keeps most of them from committing suicide? What about this environment fuels the loss that they feel? Is it fair to consider those who do not commit suicide or revolt apathetic? What role did previous beliefs (e.g., cultural, religious) have on the emotional decisions made at every turn? What role did shame play, if any?

Once women were bound in the trade market on the Western coast and led onto the ships on the waters of the Atlantic, it became an intense challenge to get out of it. As Smallwood indicates, "Only by death, escape, or redemption did captives - even those deemed not 'merchantable' - evade the market's grasp" (Smallwood 86). Although slave owners like Fitch had little interest in girls and women, once these female slaves found themselves part of their “cargo” the journey was not designed to make getting out easy. Once sold to a trader headed back to the Americas, specific things began to occur enclosing the women in an environment to begin the transformation of the individual woman to a piece of property. Smallwood discusses,

> Once captives went aboard the slave ship, their management continued to be governed by the alienating agenda of commodification. Captives were segregated by sex in the quarters belowdecks when they came aboard, and it was common to erect barricades to separate men and women during time spent abovedeck as well - a strictly observed policy that reflected the captain's concern to disable normal social relations among the human cargo. (76)

The women began to be impacted by the techniques used to "disable normal social relations," which seems to be one of the many ways the trip on the Middle Passage began to strip the women of their individuality. The ways in which the women used to interact with others – often in terms of kinship allegiances and other various tribal/community structures – began to disappear with the ship policies and physical barriers created on the ship. At whatever turn the female slaves seemed to take, the ship and journey shifted them to a more monolithic group of "cargo."

The group of women being carted along as cargo has a presence in narratives like Equiano's and a disappearance can be detected in his work. Equiano describes women who journeyed along with him as he was brought to the shore. He interestingly includes the disappearance of the women who had become important on his enslaved journey. As established in an earlier example, the women proved to be essential to the day-to-day experience of others (Equiano 43–44). Because while some of the women disappear at this point of Equiano's narrative, the petition of Belinda, the shared narrative of Chloe Spear, and the works of Phillis Wheatley show that the women were still individuals though caught up in a system designed to erase their lived experiences. It seems that at moments like this we can see indicators of how the more complex, individualized experiences of the slave women become more monolithic to the point where the intersection of the journey from their communities to the mystery of the ship presents some type of realistic point of no return making the women who survived to this point and afterwards, finding themselves in the Americas as inventory.

Considering the *Sally*, the ship aforementioned with the description of the young woman found hanging dead, the ship's contents for the journey to the coast of Africa included New England rum, flour, coffee, onions, spermaceti candles, iron hoops, and plenty of other items according to the Invoice of Sundry Merchandise recorded as the ship left Providence, Rhode Island (*Voyage of the Slave Ship Sally*). As Captain Hopkins prepared for this voyage to trade many of the listed items for human beings, the vessel gendered feminine with the name, *Sally*, had been prepped for the transport for, hopefully for them and unfortunately for many others, as many African souls as they could trade. The two month journey to the African Coast was typical of many ships that embarked on journeys similar to the *Sally*'s . It is not clear where the ship first lands in early November 1764, but the trade is documented as beginning around November 10th. Captain Hopkins takes the plenteous cargo and begins the trade that results in his November 15th purchase of his first enslaved humans – a boy and a girl. In an exchange for 156 gallons of rum and a barrel of flour, Captain Hewett presents the two young people as commodities (*Voyage of the Slave Ship Sally*).

Figure 5 *Voyage of the Slave Ship Sally, 1700;* as shown on cds.library.brown.edu

While this process happens with both the young boy and young girl, my focus on slave women's experience zooms in towards the girl. The ledger has the "1 slave girl" connected to 10 0 0 and markings indicating a price that is placed on the young girl in relation to the goods that are exchanged in this transaction. This moment for the young girl becomes another crucial part

of her journey and piece of her narrative that is not written. Though nameless, she springs from the page as an individual even if listed as an object equal or less than the barrel of "flower" (*Voyage of the Slave Ship Sally*). We do know parts of her story. She makes it to the *Sally* from wherever she had been captured. She makes it on the ship as indicated by her place on the ship ledger. She does survive to see the next group of humans, some girls and one woman, because there is no indication of loss before the next trade.

Figure 6 *Voyage of the Slave Ship Sally, 1700;* as shown on cds.library.brown.edu

Similar trades continue on Hopkins' voyage where humans brought to the African Coast as property replaced goods that once filled the *Sally*. In early December, Hopkins gains thirteen slaves at James Fort, a slave "factory" located near the Gambia River on the African Windward Coast. Of these thirteen slaves, it is not clear what number of women are included in this trade, but more girls found themselves on this ship as indicated on the ledger that the trade happened between Governor Debatt and Captain Hopkins – six of the thirteen slaves were boys and girls (*Voyage of the Slave Ship Sally*).

Approximately 180 days after the young girls found themselves on the *Sally* as slaves, the ship's ledger reveals that an enslaved woman commits suicide on June 8, 1765, the same day Captain Hopkins purchases his 108th captive, a woman, which can be seen in Figure 5. A woman for a woman seems to be the exchange that takes both women's narrative beyond a general narrative of enslavement. One has an individualized experience at this moment nodding towards specific feelings and moments that led to the decision, insinuated by the ledger, to choose death.

Or she could have met death at the hand of a punishment that ended with an apparatus around her neck. Or various combinations of a closer look come together to analyze this “hanging” woman in her own personal moment.

This woman does not leave behind a written text in the language of her oppressors or her own language that would outline the daily ruminations of her enslaved experience. She is, however, left in the ship ledger of the *Sally*, reminding scholars and interested researchers that she existed in her own unique moment. The fact is that she once lived and was found dead on June 8, 1765. We do not know her birth date as specifically as her documented death date. This does not mean that we do not attempt to research, recover, and reimagine what her life has been like. Considering the locations where the *Sally* docked and the Captain traded bring some specific possibilities of the regions where she could have called home. The limited ship specifications provide some information about the conditions she found herself in during the last moments of her life, helping with the deconstruction of the monolithic, commodified slave woman. As I consider this woman, I want to know what her name was, what and who she lost when enslaved, where she felt she was going, and even what she may have felt she had to gain in her taking her life. The act of hanging herself, as the ship ledger indicates, seems to hint at those parts of her life that we would want to know of any human. When she died, though, the documenter did not see her as human. She represented another lost piece of property, and that only earned her a brief line. The words “Woman […] Hanged her Self” are, unfortunately, the primary written keys to understanding this woman’s individual humanity. She could never have been the property that she was traded for or like any of the sugar, flour, candles or hoops that packed the ship in similar ways that she had been. No matter how much the captain and crew manipulated the human “cargo,” humanity always shined through. We can now contemplate this

woman, what her journey could have been like, and how human she was. Her recovery from a line on a ship ledger still allows us to see pre-nineteenth century slave women in more complicated ways. Not all of them survived the journey. Some of them, as this woman was documented, may have made choices to make sure they had the last say.

During this involuntary travel women like Wheatley and Spear become what we see in the pieces of written texts that circulate under the topics of slavery and African-American firsts. During the transportation their identity wanes as the journey was designed to shake up their human norm, and it becomes difficult to put into words who they once were. Equiano provides brief descriptions that show the women are beautiful and have voices, but it is difficult to tell what they hold on to as they are on the forced journey. While describing the community on land, Equiano provides a more specific idea about what roles women had, but once on the ship, he does not offer much of a description that gives ideas about who the women were pre-kidnapping. The clearest surface ideas about the women is that they have been packed on the ship.

Considering how he notices the women's sounds in his text, it becomes apparent that a transformation had begun to occur. Words seem to easily come together for him to describe the beauty that he knows and sees in the women, but the description of the arrival to the ship welcomes an incomprehensible experience. As he states in his narrative, "The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable" (Equiano 41). He does not hear a clear narrative from the women, yet he hears the terror as they recognize the strange nature of the next leg of the journey. The forced transformation melds together many individuals, but their loudest projections cry out and reach deep. The shrieks and groans reveal another pivotal transformation point for the record of the women who are not completely silenced.

Considering the evidence from nature, slave ship structures, and ledgers, enslaved women's accounts do not explicitly include the details of water, ship conditions, and trade/property analysis. With Wheatley, a surface level overview does not reveal the information on her personal experience in this portion of her journey. Travel on ships and over waters seems to show the transformative possibilities that may have become mixed for her. Based on the textual evidence left by her, it seems she loses everything from Africa to the Americas, and it seems to impact her in ways that lead her in her limited options to be seen as completely silenced, in explicit ways. However, when her texts are placed in the context of the vessels and nature, the water proves to be where her major fluidity lies. Her journey on the water at a later time, this time from the Americas to Europe, provides another transformative opportunity that allows her to encounter a different society and create what would seem like a desire for freedom in a more accessible way. The gain of freedom closely follows her travel back across the water from Europe back to the Americas. She seems to have been affected by the trip and upon her travel back to Boston wanted to have another transformation. For her, the ships and the water become steady in the major transformations she has over the course of her life. Of course Wheatley is a part of this as well, but focusing on the integral aspects of the journey help to connect Wheatley's experience with the nameless women in Equiano's narrative and Chloe Spear who did not have the exact same experience, but they have been transformed by the same type of movement. What we learn from the narratives and what seem to be silences presented by them is that their sense of community and identity shatters with the initial Middle Passage journey that exposes them to experiences unlike anything they could imagine.

Wheatley becoming a poet who writes in her master's language and primarily about the experiences that others have in travel and loss presents a body of work that explores what may

indicate thoughts on her own travel and loss. As Caroline Wigginton states in her conference response to some of my earlier work, returning to a conversation about oceanic mobility and confinement presents yet another way to consider literary work such as Wheatley's who has pervasive themes of "oceanic migration" in her work (Wigginton 3). Early in *Poems on Various Subjects* Wheatley establishes an idea of the commencement of her journey in "To the University of Cambridge, in New-England" and her more widely known poem, "On Being Brought from Africa to America." Both of these poems have elements of a shore and movement across the Atlantic, which indicates an area of discussion when placing Wheatley's literary work in the context of the Middle Passage and what it entails – the ocean, movement, confinement, travel, and transformation.

In Wheatley's "To the University of Cambridge, in New-England," her muses provide assistance to begin this journey in this piece of writing showing a new location unlike where she finds herself now. She writes, "Twas not long since I left my native shore / The land of errors, and Egyptian gloom" (Wheatley 11). In what seems to be Wheatley introducing herself to the students at Cambridge, she does not neglect to include her signature experience from her "native shore." Beginning with this portion of her experience coupled with the historical concerns and knowledge about the Middle Passage journey, this moment seems to be what Wheatley finds to be a central part of her identity. Though the Middle Passage journey is vast and difficult to express within the confines of a growing slave system, Wheatley manages to still include the elements of the shore and travel as part of her identity and the expressions she spreads through her poetry.

While Wheatley incorporates the oceanic migration a tinge more explicitly with her use of the words "native shore," she does not establish clearly the Middle Passage transport that she

experienced from West Africa to Boston. Interestingly, Wheatley establishes with her poem the idea that she has been transported with the title; however, the lines of the poem do not reference directly the ocean, ships, or other elements of the transformative journey. In fact, the only form of movement she includes directly is "th'angelic train" (Wheatley 13). Readers are left with her title being the most indicative of the journey across the ocean as part of "On Being Brought from Africa to America." What we as readers know for sure based on what Wheatley includes in this more famous poem is that she is "brought" as she describes first in the title "from Africa to America" and describes again in the first line "from my Pagan land" (Wheatley 13). What we gather from other forms of documentation, diagrams, and areas of study is that for a slave woman like Wheatley, being brought from Africa to America is much more than what the eight lines in the one stanza can encompass. Therefore, Wheatley either seems to make a decision or is bound in such a way that she creatively has to express what the Middle Passage is to her on a personal level in a less explicit way. For contemporary readers and researchers, it can be challenging to establish specifically what agency she has in this decision, but her works when read as contributing to the first person accounts of travel in the Middle Passage help as we continue to unravel this remarkable work of American poetry within the context of historical evidence of slave conditions and property lists. Together they enrich the understanding of enslaved women's lived experiences in the oceanic migration and transformation.

These two early references in *Poems on Various Subjects* are not the only ways that Wheatley uses the water, shores, fluid movements, and other elements indicative of a major oceanic journey can be found in many of the poems. As Wheatley documents the travels of others both on the seas of this life and the next, she seems to document her own momentous travel over the Middle Passage and also those who had the same experience. Exploring her work

with a more "important, vocal, and affecting presence of enslaved women upon the ocean adds new interest to these poems" and another piece to highlight as we work to consider a more complex understanding of pre-nineteenth century slave women's experiences (Wigginton 4).

With Wheatley there is no day-to-day type description of the Middle Passage, but the details of weather and vessel are found in texts like Equiano's narrative. The weather and vessel conditions layer on pre-nineteenth century slave women's experiences and confine them in places that create an interesting intersection of fluid movement yet chained positions. Equiano's initial impressions of the first ship he encountered provide the details of the confinement and enslavement experienced by travelling pre-nineteenth century slave women. He describes diverse black people chained together in a confined space, plenty of dejection and sorrow, heat, sickness, and death (Equiano 39; 40). Swirling together, the conditions of nature, the environment of the ship, and the encounter of the diverse people, this text reveals the impact travelling had on the slave women in many ways. The story of Equiano's journey not only stands as the personal detailed account of a slave man, but we can garner from these descriptions what the journey while travelling is like for slave women. By focusing on the descriptions from Equiano's narrative, the puzzle becomes a bit clearer with the first-hand account of a travelling slave who witnessed the conditions and shared them with not only himself

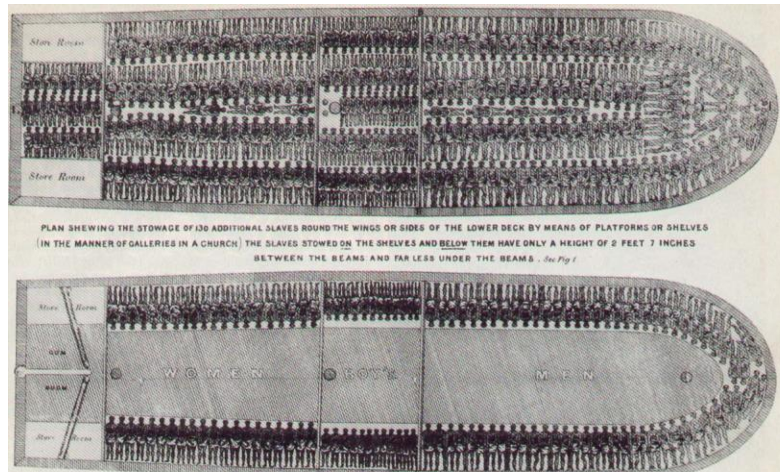


Figure 7. Resume du temoignage donne devant un comite de la chamber des communes de la Grande Bretagne de l'Irelande, touchant le traite des negres; Image Reference, as shown on www.slaveimages.org, compiled by Jerome Handler and Michael Tuite, and sponsored by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and the University of Virginia Library.

in mind, but the slave women as well.

In conjunction with Equiano's description, Figure 5 provides a visual for consideration when working to discover what the travelling slave woman experienced. The diagram shows the limited space that Equiano explains, and it becomes evident how a slave woman can be impacted by the traumatic travel and transformed on her journey from shore to shore. Very small amounts of breathing space are shown; in any available surface where a human can be laid, a human is placed. The heat, the sickness, and the death thrive in these circumstances, and the slave women have no viable options for life. As Equiano describes, there is a multitude of black people chained together (39). In the diagram of the description of the slave ship, very little space is visible showing how closely chained together the slaves were on the ship. It is clear that that the space is "confined" with "no turning," and those placed in it could have "almost suffocated" (Equiano 41). With Equiano's text and the visual text of the slave ship diagram, more specific details of the traumatic travel of pre-nineteenth century slave women can be discussed as well as uncovered.

Many of the slave women could have had experiences similar to Belinda when approaching this portion of the forced journey to the unknown. In her petition, Belinda includes snippets of this moment, "Scenes which her imagination never conceived of, - a floating World - the sporting Monsters of the deep - and the familiar meeting of the Billows and the clouds, stove, but in vain to divert her melancholly attention, from three hundred Affricans in chains, suffering the most excruciating torments;" (Belinda). Belinda's recollection of the ship, water, and fellow slaves pull together some fragments of her experience as well as support the various other discussions of slave ship size and other slave experiences.

The transit that the slave women endure have ample moments where their treatment is highlighted, and texts from writers like Equiano offer sites to discuss the ways slave women were treated while travelling. Though limited, the information offered paired with the readings of Wheatley's poetry, Belinda's Petition, and Chloe Spear's story put together a clearer experience of the affecting slave woman. The system silences their feelings in the experience causing the look at these works to not follow a privileged, traditional thought.

Alone, the work of Wheatley, Belinda, and Spear provide a glimpse of the ocean, ships, transit. Wheatley's experience is not explicit and what we know of the water and vessels help us navigate the possible influences of the journey on her creative work. Belinda and Spear's experiences have a more explicit focus and the ability to have information about dimensions of ships, logs of items and people, and entries about the weather help show the depth of the experience. Though the dimensions of ships we know are not the ones they travelled on or amount of items or people is not the same, the information shows the many possibilities that inform what they can share in their work.

Frances Smith Foster's work on the slave woman shows the boundaries that keep the idea of slave women, both then and now, very tight and strong. She writes, "Mention the slave woman, however, and noble images fade. They see her as victim - to be pitied, perhaps - but neither respected nor emulated. In the popular imagination, she stands on the auction block, nameless, stripped to the waist, her infant just sold from her arms, waiting to be claimed by yet another licentious master" (Foster xxix). Foster's predominant focus on the nineteenth century slave woman does show a woman "stripped" of who she was and what she could have become, especially when viewed from the male perspective. With the pre-nineteenth century, there is more to be explored and considered. With the look at Equiano and Spear along with visual images, the

memories of what the slave women may have endured and the transformations that occurred can be seen a bit clearer. As Joanna Brooks asks, "But what for those of us who abandon silence to admit that we are hungry for memory we never had and that we can never come by honestly" (*Why We Left: Untold Stories and Songs of America's First Immigrants* 19)? This hunger is what fuels the continuous need to approach texts in different and new ways for those of us who do hunger for memories that do not honestly exist. The traditional ways of finding historical facts do not always work for research on pre-nineteenth slavery women, and in order to find important information about their experiences, different and new ways must be considered and practiced. Slave women had not been my primary focus when Spear's memoir offers limited information about her experience in Africa and how she gets to the Americas, so when combined with Equiano's work, more details can be considered. I had not initially read Equiano for many years as a text that provides the experience of slave women, but a different approach allowed me to see the fragments located in his work. Equiano stands out as an individual slave with an experience that garners him attention and becomes an important text that many turn to as the conversations about the pre-nineteenth century experience of slaves. However, pre-nineteenth century slave women do not have the same luxury. Most of them can be perceived to be silent even when, like Wheatley, they speak. Without the discussion of texts like Equiano and Spear, it is difficult to show the possibilities for gathering fragments together to present a clearer memory of the experiences of slave women.

With the Middle Passage being a major first step in the transformation, its pivotal position carries the affect that extends to the experiences that the women have on land. Whether buried in lost places of their minds and/or hearts, not easily recalled, or lost forever, the enslaved women's feelings ignited on this journey transform them into a hybrid situation – human and

property. The absence of freedom leaves little room, literally and figuratively, for the women and girls to keep what made them who they were when home. The process to hold on to what one knows, believes, privileges, understands, etc. is difficult when freedom is present amongst other identity forming forces. Without freedom, this task becomes even more difficult, and this journey begins to provide the site, though not completely described with the written word, where a better understanding of the state of affect is for the slave women and how it paints a picture to build upon the decisions the women make while enslaved and later free. What would Wheatley have written about this journey if she could have been free to be candid? How could Spear have been detailed in a first person account if it were a viable option for her? What could Equiano's piece provide if the controversy and continuing authentication were not in the way?

The water and the ships ultimately have the most powerful voice and understand best what the experience looked like from all sides of the Middle Passage. What the ships carried and the water continues to carry fill in portions of the gaps, and in order to better understand what they have to share, a hunger to understand and to open to the malleable nature of the limited evidence that gives a better idea of what pre-nineteenth century slave women experienced. Unlike the nineteenth century, the women lack even more agency and support with how they can share their experiences with the written word. In order to better understand the experience that they endure on land, the traumatic transformation gives a more complete consideration of how a slave woman becomes a slave woman. When we get to the nineteenth century, it is readily understood that a slave woman is *born* that way, and this nature rhetoric becomes embedded in the understanding of many who uphold it for the sake of the slave system in place. However, the slave women before the nineteenth century do not become slaves by a birth but through the kidnapping and transportation that *transforms* them into an enslaved human.

From the typically free[36] woman or girl to the captured (something that describes a person who cannot quite comprehend what's about to happen because of the cultural/language barriers) to an enslaved woman presents an affected world that impacts how they feel and what they endure. Increasing the comprehension, as small as it can be, helps with the understanding of issues of race, sexuality, and trauma in ways to help our present concerns with these same issues. Without a closer look at the root of the foundational past events, the perceived silences and gaps will continue to haunt our human experience and resurface in a number of ways through other systems and constructions.

While the water, the ships, and the predominantly silenced transported pre-nineteenth century slave women do not seem to offer much for the scholarship with preference for more straight-forward evidence, they do provide the opportunity and the information that show the unbalanced power of the privileged written word and the need for more unorthodox approaches to understanding our histories with a thorough look at a variety of texts. The lens must consider the silences and gaps, especially as seen with the discussion of transit and transformation. With this lens it helps give texture to the work of Wheatley and Belinda's petition as well.

Once the journey across the water is made, the silence continues because the familiarity of solid ground is not the familiar land that the women had known. This shore of early colonies and burgeoning plantations do not resemble the customs of their communities. As Belinda states, "Once more her eyes were blest with a Continent – but alas! how unlike the Land where she received her being" (Belinda's Petition)! She recognizes land but clearly understands it is not a place that she had known from her life in her homeland.

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[36] I do understand that slavery exists in Africa, but I'm not sure of the dynamics in terms of how already enslaved people are captured and transported to the Americas. I would still argue that there is a transformation and a difference in slavery in Africa than the Americas.

Different Places, Same Passage

One of the first stops once on land leads the enslaved women to the peculiar event of being sold. Equiano describes the arrival to the island of Barbados with a clear level of uncertainty. He and the other men, women, boys, and girls aboard the ship had no idea what would happen to them as the island came into view.[37] Once on the merchant yard, all of the slaves were "pent up altogether like so many sheep in a fold, without regard to sex or age" (Equiano 42). Equiano does not have a separate discussion of how women are affected by the holding area where everyone is placed without regard to gender, but it is interesting to note that this arrival solidifies in some way the transformation of the females into pre-nineteenth century slave women. Their roles become something of the past, and the land becomes the steady, stable signal that this is a point of no return. The women do not even get to have a space to themselves and await with everyone else as the strange people, similar to the ones they first encountered on the shores of Western Africa, prod at them and purchase them.

As their property status becomes a glimmer of what would be the beginning of the end for many of the slave women, the purchasing process becomes a significant point of transformation. Part of the purchasing process, as seen in the example from Equiano, required stops at various shores. For instance, the West Indies is a stop that many slave ships made. While not all slaves disembarked here, slave ships brought them here where they encountered buyers on the shores. Thomas Thistlewood, a plantation owner in the West Indies, is methodical in his search for the type of slaves that can be beneficial at his plantations. In particular, he wanted "men-boys and girls, none exceeding 16 or 18 years old" to provide him the best outcome in the case of the work he needed at the Egypt plantation. Though the preference for the ship captain

[37] The ship that Equiano is on is anchored on Bridge Town on the island of Barbados. I need to include citation information here.

sending for slaves that eventually captured Wheatley was given orders to not bring back young girls, purchasers like Thistelwood wanted girls that did not exceed 18 years old. From Thistlewood's perspective, the body of the young women once free in their homelands now becomes property with value controlled by their owner.

A few months after Wheatley arrived in Boston in July 1761, Thistlewood purchased three girls: Sukey, about 14 years old; Maria, about 15 years old; and a third, who is not documented as carefully as Sukey and Maria. Thistlewood does not indicate where Sukey comes from, but he does document that Maria comes from a country named Ogo ("Thomas Thistlewood - Sales and Branding"). Where is Ogo, and how does Thistelwood know this? Are Sukey and Maria their names given to them at birth, or had the slave traders already renamed them? What do they feel when picked from, what was probably similar to Equiano's description, the holding pen? Was there a struggle?

These women soon experienced the physical pain of branding, as Thistlewood indicates that "[t]he new Negroes were soon branded with my mark TT on the right shoulder" ("Thomas Thistlewood - Sales and Branding"). The transformation becomes concretely physical as the women have a mark that signals they belong to Thistlewood, with his owner perspective, includes this information to establish how his property becomes his own. He mentions that he pays "200" for the "one boy and three girls," and this seems to signal enough that he owned them. However, he offers the details of the branding to, what seems like, ensure that it is understood that these girls, and the other males, belong to him ("Thomas Thistlewood - Sales and Branding").

Although Thistelwood has a more detailed approach to his documentation, the perceived silenced experience of the women is noticeable. Without the gendered pronouns for one

description, it seems that the third girl that he bought gets lost. Without the clear indication, the third girl's transformation is lost, but it represents the gaps and silences found in the experience of the eighteenth century slave women who are captured in or near their communities and transported at various stages to eventually get to the "auction block."[38]

The land does not provide promises of freedom or indicate a more favorable experience than what they had once known. This is evident in Equiano and Thistlewood's descriptions that show a new set of transformative encounters that connect more to the establishment of property and the physical transformations of becoming the property of others. Beyond the actual physical experiences of the slaves, the area also is a continuation of the foreign environments and people that they had begun to encounter in their home continent. The ports that they are taken to do not connect specifically to the various areas of Africa that they come from, and this adds to their experience another affective atmosphere. On the ship, the horrors and terrors mixed with uncertainty of who these people are and what their plans for them would be.

Understanding how the hybrid, traumatic nature of the Middle Passage begins impacts the way slave women can be seen and how the moment they reach land becomes the culmination of the unknown silence surrounding the journey. When they get to land, there are still a lot of unknowns, but things become more concrete in terms of being less likely to return home and retain their identities as the young girl or woman had once known. For a slave woman like Wheatley who comes on the shores of the Americas as a young girl, the mystery of the experience is extended, and it seems that the mystery lingers in her work and in the recovery and analysis of her and her texts.

When the enslaved women find themselves on the "new" shores of the Americas

[38] I place auction block in quotation marks here because every place is not the literal auction block. In some cases there are pens that the slaves are picked from.

where distinctions become less clear than they were once they were journeying on the ocean, the lack of stability does not completely silence them. What this journey does is give them experiences that cannot be expressed and understood universally with any one type of narrative. As Rediker states, "Amid the brutal imprisonment, terror, and premature death, they [enslaved] managed a creative, life-affirming response: they fashioned new languages, new cultural practices, new bonds, and a nascent community among themselves aboard the ship" (Rediker 8). This community gathers among fragments from our contemporary positions. The fragments represent the new experiences that could not be captured in their native language or in their master's languages. There may lie a disconnect in overcoming the rhetoric of privilege and authentication when considering the experiences of pre-nineteenth century slave women. Following the fragmented details seem to lead us to better understanding of how these women as individuals figure into this constantly changing period of time of unprecedented captivity.

As this large movement of humans begins, the loss noticed around the 17th century probably did not seem like much to the population of over a million on the Gold Coast. However, that changes because at some point "those who inhabited the waterside towns where the business of slave trading was conducted must have looked on warily, wondering what might develop out of this change in direction of slave traffic across the littoral" (Smallwood 94). That wariness along with terror is what the slave women encountered, and it is heightened with the many unknowns of the involuntary transport. As Smallwood notes, "[B]y the turn of the eighteenth century, the incentive to respond to the fast-growing demand for captive people was powerful" (96). With such a powerful moment in history, an interdisciplinary approach to question how privilege, authentication, silence, and recovery work to help reveal the complexity of the enslaved women's experiences.

Chapter 3

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
- Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise"

Maya Angelou's stirring poem points to the material culture from which pieces of the diasporic Africans' experiences have been found. This portion of Angelou's poem and the use of the term "huts" became a representative link for me why material culture plays a pivotal role in the understanding of slave women's experiences. Interestingly, the hut becomes a considerable representative of the relationship that material culture and slave women have. Discussions of the slave woman often points to how she occupies the domestic sphere in interesting ways, or when not explicitly in this sphere she is often discussed in relation to the domestic sphere. The hut has even become a place in material culture where the stories of African slaves have been considered. Leland Ferguson in *Uncommon Ground* concerns his work with understanding the stories that lie in the artifacts he and other scholars found in areas where plantations had once been the center of life. His critical look at what he finds and the findings of other archaeologists take into account what some of the common ideas about pottery and other artifacts mean to African Americans. The architectural contribution of the porch tells stories of protection, units, and shelter (Ferguson 57). The African preferences for bowls tell another collection of stories of food, nourishment, and community (Ferguson 55). In the twentieth century, archaeologists such as Ferguson began to recognize what the discoveries of their work contributed to the understanding of the past. In reference to the architectural artifacts emerging in excavations, Ferguson recognizes what the remnants can offer to our understanding of the slave experience in the Americas. He writes, "The houses of these African pioneers had fallen down, their skills had been demeaned, and their story had been forgotten; but their archaeological remains awaited

discovery" (Ferguson 62). With the recovery of this material rises the story that had been forgotten. The evidence of their arguably conscious efforts to continue to impart on their unfortunate enslaved experiences lies in the, sometimes literal, bits and pieces of the material culture.

Attaching an architectural structure to pre-nineteenth century slave women and their production of stories is not my specific goal for this look at material culture. However, Ferguson and other archaeologists, historians, and scholars, throughout the disciplines I have gathered work and analysis from, have worked towards critically thinking of how the interconnectedness of material culture, the body, identity, and written text. Their work move us in a direction that opens up our discussions and analyses to ideas that have been many times closed with a static or isolated approach to concerns past, present, and future. This becomes important with the study of eighteenth century slave women who already have a limited spot in the realm of the privileged written word.

For the pre-nineteenth century slave women of the Americas who do not have narratives that fit the privileged written texts, the material culture in some ways become an encapsulated representation of their varying identities, signaling who they had been, who in reality they had been made into, and who they could make themselves to be. Whether they were young girls or mothers taken from their homes, they transformed into slaves against their will, needing to find a way to regain and restore their identities through their bodies. This hope to regain, restore, or reinvent their identities led them to act with their physical bodies in order to reach towards who they could make themselves to be. That is where material culture seems to have an important role for the pre-nineteenth century slave women. Embedded in the material culture of the pre-nineteenth century lies more narratives of the slave women who we long to better understand

because the privileging structure of “facts” is not on our side. As Saidiya Hartman writes in her article “Venus in Two Acts”, "History pledges to be faithful to the limits of fact, evidence, and archive, even as those dead certainties are produced by terror" (“Venus in Two Acts” 9). It is the limitation of facts that have proven to be a challenge for scholars such as Hartman and others who have thought of slave women in some depth beyond just what the historical facts can provide. We know that the distinct female slave experiences did not lie solely in the characteristic fashion of Phillis Wheatley and her poetry nor did it only begin in the nineteenth century narrative of Linda Brent, whose identity is revealed to be Harriet Jacobs. With everything the pre-nineteenth century slave women touched, and everything that touched them, became a page in the narratives they would never get a chance to write on their own terms.

If the narratives that we have accessed and the histories that have been written are not enough for better understanding pre-nineteenth century slave women, the question is where else can we look and what else can we do? In this chapter I discuss how we can focus on the body and bodies of the pre-nineteenth century slave women and how it becomes representative of their identity that then intersects with material culture. While the slave women do not have the agency to write their narratives on their own terms, their bodies become texts identifying them as slaves yet often revealing ways in which they are more complex than an unpaid worker. Through the material culture surrounding them and their bodies, we can see the ways in which their identities are stripped, preserved, and recreated. In this chapter I use an engraving as an establishing example to discuss the intersectional nature of the slave women, their bodies, identities, and material culture and subsequently how all of this impacts their narratives and the recovery of those narratives that honestly seem out of reach. The discussion on torture devices will show how the body meeting this section of material culture strips the women of their indigenous

identities transforming them into slaves. The following section on clothing shows what many of the women found it takes to preserve what they knew to be their identities and yet recognizing ways to create their own identities, leaving behind untraditional narratives. The runaway ads include descriptions of material culture and how they impact the lived experiences of enslaved women. The stories of multiple African narratives arrived and have been sustained in the Americas via the material culture and many disciplines have given attention to these items and their meanings to those who created and influenced the creation of them. Within the material culture of slavery are fragments that intersect well with the literary textual analysis to critically fill in the narrative shells of pre-nineteenth century slave women.

The Meaning of Material Culture and the Archive of the Body

Multiple definitions of material culture signal the crucial role the materials play in all cultures, but particularly historical cultures. For Bernie Herman: "Material culture is the history and philosophy of objects and the myriad relationships between people and things." Joyce Hill Stoner says, "Material Culture is the unpacking or mining of both historic and everyday objects to find the embedded ideas and concepts that define the surrounding society." Arwen Mohun's definition of material culture is: "Material culture is the relationship between people and things" ("What is Material Culture?"). These definitions do not necessarily have slaves and shackles explicitly in the scope of relationships, but the notion of relationship helps to bring humanity to the slave women and recognize the impact the material culture of slavery has on their identity and their relationships to themselves and others. These definitions inform my work as I work to show the relationship between the women and material culture to better understand their narratives.

Material culture is significant for pre-nineteenth century slaves. As Martha Katz-Hyman recognizes in her early work to increase the historical presentation of black slaves in colonial Williamsburg, the materials used by slaves play a significant role in understanding who they are. She writes,

> We know so very little about what blacks thought about themselves, their white masters and neighbors, and the conditions of their lives, that learning how they dealt with their physical environment is a vital, and sometimes the only, clue to learning more about them as individuals and as members of a community. Whether they contented themselves with only the provisions supplied by their white owners or sought independent means to better their material lives reflects two very different and vastly significant attitudes regarding their concepts of self-worth, their aspirations, their skills, and their values. Whether or not they clung to African ways or adopted English values with regard to the objects in their lives implies an acculturation process about which we still know relatively little. (Katz-Hyman iv–v)

The relatively small amount that we know about slaves in general before the nineteenth century seems even smaller when we look to learn more about slave women. They came in contact with a variety of the material culture before the nineteenth century. The material culture of bondage as well as the material culture of clothing seem to show some ideas of what the women knew of themselves and experienced in the system of slavery through the process of forced transportation and relocation.

For this approach to better understanding a more complex narrative for the eighteenth century slave women, the archive of the body is also considered in conjunction with material culture. The relationship that the two have inform the unique ways that are more necessary than

sometimes established for the more in depth discussion of slave women's experiences and how we are able to talk about them. Heather Miyano Kopelson defines the archive of the body as "contain[ing] historical data that force a reconfiguration of the possibilities of historical narrative. This newly reframed narrative draws on evidence beyond words and numbers on parchment and paper or even material objects to more readily incorporate multiple ways of knowing and being that allowed for the collapsing of time and space" (7). When we go to the body and the material culture that often intersects with it, a reframing of the narrative occurs for the women who could not create narratives with an unmediated agency. The evidence becomes more about what is not explicitly written and more about what the possibilities are for the narrative framework. Considering material culture and the archive of the body also help my discussion shine light on the humanity that the women possessed although they may not always be found in the written documents as such. The cold nature of the material culture and the traditional archive alone come alive in different ways when studying the archive of the body.

Using a material culture and body archive focus allows me to continue to build the various ways that scholars have approached a non-linear journey to understanding history and lived experiences of slave women. From a literary perspective, heavily influenced by the privileging of written texts, I join other scholars in meeting the experience of pre-nineteenth century slave women at the intersection of various texts: engravings, torture devices, clothing, and runaway ads. With this particular endeavor, this chapter works to consider how these texts mentioned were used to strip the identities of pre-nineteenth century slave women, help them preserve parts of their identities, and provide opportunities to create new identities, showing the multiple narrative frameworks. An emphasis solely on the first person written accounts of pre-nineteenth century slave women do not offer a more in depth and diverse look at their

experiences in this historical moment. This continues to reiterate the problematic nature of researching the slave experience as Mechal Sobel establishes in her work *The World They Made Together*. She establishes openly the problematic nature of records and yet echoes other scholars by not being deterred from exploring the research and critically thinking about the documentation and texts available (Sobel 6, 8, 10–11). These circumstances limit the contemporary understanding we have of pre-nineteenth century slave women's lived experiences and makes it difficult for their stories to move from the marginal places they are often found when considering the literary concerns of Early American literature. However, embracing the challenges of problematic records help with the continuous look at ways in which the women's identities were stripped, preserved, whether or not completely successful, and recreated, though oftentimes only seen through hints. This look at their varied identities and material culture will contribute to an ever-growing understanding of pre-nineteenth century slave women's lives and narratives.

Pre-nineteenth Century Slave Women's Identities

The identities of pre-nineteenth century slave women are easy and difficult to identify, characterize, and establish. Considering these identities is easy because of the distinct gender and sex roles presented for them once inserted into the growing slave system. It is the gendered identities that distinguish women in the discussion of slavery. As Trevor Burnard establishes, "Slave women were workers, mothers, and sexual partners [...] The big difference between slave women and slave men was that women were both producers and reproducers" (210). The physical work that they could do as well as the distinct work that their physical bodies were created to do placed them in a unique group as slaves in the Americas.

The complexity of the slave women's identities also lies in these very facts. A recognizable difference such as this leads to questions. What does a slave woman who recognizes this duality presented by her sex and gender do with it? Does she view it as a power? How does she use it in her resistance? What does she produce and reproduce? What do those products and children represent about her experience? The questions make me think of the volumes of written work not available about their experiences because the conditions of their enslavement did not allow the degree of agency needed to write them. Through understanding their identities as represented through the use of materials on their bodies and within the culture of slavery, hopefully we will continue to see more about who these women were and what their narratives possibly looked like.

Because of these complex identities, the value of the female slave should have been greater (Burnard 214). She produced for her master's gain, from a simple viewpoint, through economics or desire.[39] Then she reproduced, depending on conditions and locations, children that would be born into the slave system and sometimes the complicated system of race and family seen in nineteenth century texts such as Frederick Douglass' work where the master in many cases was also the biological father of slaves.

Literary studies look to the written texts such as stories, poems, drama, and other narratives for clues of what experiences look like for others. For work on the experiences and culture in the early Americas, the reliance on literature alone becomes problematic under the

[39] Economics and desire are not the only ways it seems that slave women could produce for their masters. Some masters had what seem to have been relationships as their slave women have also been documented as mistresses. Trevor Burnard's work considers Thomas Thistlewood and his slave mistress Phibbah. Annette Gordon Reed's work establishes ways in which to think of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings' relationship.

guise of a burgeoning slave system that spurns the racial, economical and other systems that impact the written word and who is included.

At the Intersection of the Slave Women's Bodies/Identities and Material Culture

Various representative pieces of material culture, slave women, and the systemic structures of pre-nineteenth century slavery compress the simplified stories and identity crisis of the women that I am centering with my project of recovery, encounter, and intersectional scholarship. In Figure 6, Isaac Cruikshank's engraved colored print pictures show viewers the plight of pre-nineteenth century slave women whose recent journey from land to ship finds them encountering the moving material pieces of the slave system they have found themselves bound in. The material culture of bondage finds itself in action in this engraving. The rope, pulley, clothing/cloth, and ship framed with the phrase "The Abolition of the Slave Trade" pulls together a moment of a slave child's life that tips the understanding of the girl's experience into complexity that scholarship, literary and historical, often finds itself in when recovering and reimagining pre-nineteenth century slave women.

Figure 6 of the engraving below illustrates how a rope and pulley, whips, and a piece of clothing all play a part in this slave woman's experience – the stripping of her identity, the attempt to preserve her identity and subsequently create a new one – and then ultimately her life or, in this case, death. They all coalesce as part of her narrative that she does not get to write down in her own words. Instead, fragments of the material culture surrounding her experience find themselves in the engraving and in the descriptions included that leave for our current scholarship a way to recover and consider pre-nineteenth women's experiences. Cruikshank's

inspiration for this piece comes from the story of John Kimber,[40] the slave captain of the *Recovery*, who goes to court where he stood accused of murdering the young African girl because of her refusal to dance naked *(Punishment Aboard a Slave Ship).* There is no indication in this engraving of how she rejects the slave captain who desired that she dance with no clothes, but this use of materials such as the rope, whips, and piece of clothing hanging off of her offer a perspective of her experience and unfortunately of her demise. This engraving that provides a visual look at material culture in action is a piece of material culture itself, providing for contemporary scholars a representative piece that has been considered and continued to be considered when thinking of the stories of pre-nineteenth century slave women.

The scene set in this engraving can be interpreted in various ways. In an attempt to understand the human senses of such a moment, I use the engraving and possible narratives not written in the trial transcript as an establishing example for this chapter. The narrative of this moment could be established in multiple ways from many

Figure 8 The abolition of the slave trade Or the inhumanity of dealers in human flesh exemplified in Captn. Kimber's treatment of a young Negro girl of 15 for her virjen [sic] modesty; Cruikshank, Isaac, London: Pubd. by S. W. Fores, 1792 April 10.

[40] This engraving was inspired by the story of a slave captain, John Kimber, who killed at least two women, one of which is this young woman in the engraving who wanted to continue to be virtuous. He is tried on June 7, 1792, at the Admiralty Sessions at Old Baily. He is brought up on charges, but acquitted. For more information on Kimber's trial see *The trial of Captain John Kimber, for the murder of two female Negro slaves, on board the Recovery, African slave ship*.

perspectives. One objective, for lack of a better word, attempt could include:

> *Noticing how the rope marries with the circular wheel, the pulley probably makes a peculiar sound, maybe similar to the crank. Or maybe the sound comes from the woman dangling by the small of her ankle over the pair of whips that look more specifically like cat-o-nine tails. Whichever the case, she grabs the front of her head separating the skin of her forehead from her hair. A trio of unclothed, women of a darker hue look on exchanging unidentified words that may be the link to understanding what has to be said and/or done to be hovered over the very instruments that decide, to an extent, this child's agency, and subsequently other enslaved girls and women aboard the ship. Notably, a piece of fabric, resembling the similar textile covering the white men in the painting, falls toward her back* exposing *her rear.*

The narrative attempts could go on in various critical readings throughout over half of this work; however, one thing would rise more prominently each time – the slave woman's first person account would be most difficult to establish in a privileged way that literary and historical work has seen, even ignored, for many years. The engraving itself reveals, what we see in literature and historical documents, that the voice of the pre-nineteenth century slave woman is not easily heard or provided with clear agency. Just as this woman dangles in the engraving with her face away from generations of audiences who look upon it, the story is very similar as we go into the depths of the literature of the Americas and documents created by those who make the Americas their home and industrial work place with the use of free human labor. Researchers and scholars in this field of work have continued to work for a better understanding of pre-nineteenth century slave women's experience by paying attention to the material culture, the archive of the body, their identities, and how all of these impact on these women's experiences.

The engraving becomes an important place to begin in this study of how material culture impacted the body archive and identities of pre-nineteenth century slave women. A piece of material culture such as Cruikshank's engraving is not an unadulterated story of a specific slave woman, but more of an abolitionist approach to the current concerns with the slave trade. It is clear with the large words at the bottom of the engraving stating, "The Abolition of the Slave Trade." At the foundation of the larger purpose to move forward in the abolitionist campaign to end the slave trade is the story of an unnamed woman enslaved in transport. With particular attention to what details Cruikshank includes in his work, this engraving says that this young slave girl, and many other slave women, is not silent, static, or hidden. The rope and whips indicate that she has spoken in some way– contributing to her narrative that would never be documented in a privileged written form. At this point, they do not share the same native language, and in this early encounter, a language to communicate basic information is more than likely in an infant stage. However, she says no, and not in the language of her master or quoted specifically in a privileged written text. She probably does more so with her body in what she may have chosen not to do or what her body just cannot do. Still she says no, and as a result, the materials designed to strip the identity of this woman who feels she can say no appear to promote silence and oppress expression. However, her body cannot be silent yet becomes an essential piece to understanding her experience more. Her covering with the piece of clothing that she obtains supports her possible rejection of the men's desires and the stripping of her identity. It seems to show her desire to preserve her identity on the one hand while also creating something new about her identity in the slave system that, in this form, is new to her. The extension of the whips and rope show the influence of the material culture of bondage and how it removes the stories of slave women and the opportunity for them to share them with the agency needed to be

seen as authentic both in this moment of the past and the present. This engraving shows the manner in which a pre-nineteenth century slave woman's identity can be stripped, preserved, and recreated at the intersection of material culture and written texts.

With death being the earthly end of the young slave girl's story found in Cruikshank's engraving, it becomes difficult to know what she had specifically said and done up until this point. However, her unfortunate demise does not mean that her story died with her. Cruikshank seems to believe, as indicated in his depiction in the engraving, that other enslaved women see this moment in the young woman's life and pick it up to share it in some form. The three women depicted in the background with their mouths "freely" moving can serve as evidence that some portions of what led to various moments similar to this live on in the stories shared with others. The stories of the women in the background of this engraving are not mentioned specifically in the court case of John Kimber, but Cruikshank includes them for whatever purpose he feels can help the abolitionist cause he is championing. Does this young slave woman's story serve as a warning and the perpetuation of what would become a norm? Do the women not understand the severity of this experience as depicted with the awkward expressions that can be interpreted as a gleeful shock or laughter? These questions point to the concerns with images, intentions, and observations. As established, Cruikshank has intentions surrounding the abolitionist movement and his image contributes from that perspective. There also seems to be a dual concern of observation: the observers within the engraving and the observers outside of the engraving (Lacey 138). Whatever specifically Cruikshank hoped to reveal about the slave trade and the need to abolish it, he positions other enslaved women, showing how the stories of the unnamed eighteenth century slave women do not find themselves in silent isolation but in the memories

and mouths of others who witnessed and survived to communicate what they saw in some form or other. Material culture provides alternate avenues to multiple narratives.

So we look for the women where we believe they and their stories may be found. Either written in a court document, visually represented in an engraving, or travelling in the oral stories of others, the account can never be considered unadulterated, but the ability to communicate offered them the opportunity to share these stories that may be shared as tales. It is the systemic concerns with privilege and authentication that create the concerns with research and providing information on slave experiences in general and pre-nineteenth century slave women in particular. My work's goal is not to privilege the pre-nineteenth century slave women's experiences to perpetuate what has been done to their history and lived experiences, but it is to acknowledge the diversity of the pre-nineteenth century Americas with the voices, concerns, memories, and identities of these women. This is why the material culture and body of the archive become important. What we do know to be true is the use of whips, pulleys, and clothing carry the story of this young girl deemed unworthy by a man, so much so that she seems to work to preserve her identity or make a new one acceptable according to her standards. Her choice to preserve the identity she carried with her from her community, and possibly create another identity because of the situation she is found in, costs her life, any subsequent justice in the eyes of the law, and any more complete memory or narrative that she could pass along. The fragments of her story are left to those who may have witnessed this moment and spoke of it again, the court documents outlining the charges against the accused Kimber, and the caricature created by Cruikshank.

Texts like Cruikshank's work, as well as many other written texts and material culture texts, give us an opportunity to consider how the stories, or lack of stories, of pre-nineteenth

century slave women are connected to the stripping, preserving and creating of their identities within the slave system. The opening abolitionist engraving encompasses many of the aspects of the linked stories and identities. The setting of the slave ship and torture devices such as the whip, rope, and cat-o-nine tails represent the ways in which the stories, bodies, and identities of pre-nineteenth century slave women are stripped. The entire engraving and Cruikshank's action to depict this specific moment, even for his abolitionist cause, take part in the preservation of the young slave woman's story and identity. Additionally, the young woman's rejection reveals more about her story and the identity she risked her life in order to preserve. The use of fabric over her midsection reveals ways in which clothing impacted pivotal changes in stories and identities.

Cruikshank's engraving provides a glimpse of what this young slave girl may have experienced on the *Recovery*. It shows the audience the distress that the young woman experienced and alludes to the various possibilities of the torture she experienced, but even it alone does not ascertain the experience that this girl has. The document that provides some details of John Kimber's trial includes the testimony, and the writer's interpretation of that, of those who had witnessed this moment. What is found of this moment about the young slave woman moves to her body with details that permit a reading of her humanity in a time when her body and thus her identity are being stripped. On the stand, ship surgeon Thomas Dowling recounts what he knows of the murder of the young 14-15 year-old. He begins testifying that she "had been inflicted with a virulent gonorhea, and lethargy, and drowsy complaint, of which latter ailment he could never learn the real cause […and that] her diseases were stationary, and bore every probable appearance of recovery" (Student of the Temple 4). However, unlike the ship named *Recovery*, her body experiences what she cannot recover from.

What the young woman's body would carry is gruesome. It is difficult to study the archive of the body, which may seem a bit too personal and invasive. The difficulty extends to a somewhat resurrection of a body that has endured unthinkable violence and nod to the person who enacted some violence as the sign of ultimate privilege. However, as many scholars have done it anyway is much more of a testament to the need to know more about these women and their experiences rather than allow the archive to swallow them up on the imperfect foundation of facts and authentication.

If we take Dowling's recollection, as he presented it to the court, seriously, his testimony maps out the scene of what he recognized as a crime and also the ways in which her body archived a pain and disfigurement indicative of the ways in which her identity had been stripped. Dowling recalls,

> and on the 22d of December, perceiving her not to dance with the other negro women, he ordered a boy to bring a teakle, one end of which was fastened to the *mizen stay*, and the other to one of her hands, and by this she was lifted up from the deck, and remained suspended for about five minutes: and during that time, she was bounced up and down, or in other words, lifted up, and let fall again, by the way, who had a hold of the teakle. (Student of the Temple 5)

His descriptions do not stop there as he continues, "She was then taken down and suspended in the same manner by the other arm. She was next lifted up by one leg; and afterwards by the other: until at last she was taken up for the fifth time by both hands, and underwent the fifth excruciating suspension [...] might have been half an hour. When she continued hung up by both hands, the prisoner lashed her inhumanly with his whip" (Student of the Temple 6). The intersection of the body and the material culture of bondage happens in Dowling's testimony. He

does not describe one without including the other, and even at one point, as seen in the above textual example, uses the description "inhumanly" supporting the story the body archive illuminates in his testimony. Her limbs, one by one, are subjected to the teakle and mizen stay[41], instruments of the ship designed to be used for the navigation and essential attachments of the boat. In the harrowing positions, the young 14 or 15-year old body seems to continue a stripping process and simultaneously of her identity. The "excruciating suspension" sets over the space of approximately a half an hour and places her body archive within the trial archive to be centered for the discussion of understanding her narrative on the terms that will only work for the men. It is already difficult to discern through the descriptions of one person who is recounting what a man says he sees thus adding layers to the already complex archival material.

In addition to the suspension she experiences, Dowling testifies that while suspended Kimber "lashed her inhumanly with his whip" (Student of the Temple 5–6). In his description of what he believes to be a crime, the body of the young slave woman has been subjected to at least three pieces of materials, two of which could be categorized as material culture of the ship turned material culture of bondage and torture, while the whip has a more recognizable categorization as a torture device often used as a form of punishment to those in bondage. What her body tells us through Dowling's testimony is that this inhuman moment strips her body and identity to the greatest extent. Dowling recalls, "[…] and when she was let down, he forced her to walk without

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[41] The student who wrote about the trial does not indicate what specifically the teakle and mizen stay are. With a search of those terms, it becomes apparent that they both have to do with the mast of a ship. Mizen stay is a term used when describing masting and rigging of ships. One clear definition that I found described the "mizen-stay" as "stays to the main-mast." More information on that definition and the mizen-stay can be found in Francis Liadet's *Professional Recollections on Points of Seamanship, Discipline*. Based on the description found in Robert White Stevens' *On the Stowage of Ships and Their Cargoes* it seems that the teakle is an attachment mechanism used on the ship. Stevens writes, "A teakle from the ship rigs the spar in and pulls along the crane, which has an elevated platform provided with machinery for raising and lowering the outer end, to suit the convenience of the stowers in the hold" (250).

any assistance down the hatchway: this she was unable to do, having got but two or three steps, when she slipt all the rest of the way" (Student of the Temple 6). Her body with the inability to move more than "two or three steps" and her subsequent slip "all the rest of the way" shows the material cultures bearing on her body and her identity. What is to become of her after such a horrible punishment? Who is she supposed to become after this unspeakable moment? The narrative of the trial does not consider these questions so the limitations of perceived facts perpetuate the stripping of this young girl's body and identity. However, with the lens of the body archive, the humanity and experiences can arise revealing more than what facts can provide for a slave woman.

Material culture in terms of the torture devices become a vehicle for those who use them, primarily masters or other authority figures in this stage of slavery before the nineteenth century slavery. As a vehicle, they begin to strip the bodies and identities literally for the women who experience them and also impact those who witness it, such as the three women found in Cruikshank's engraving of the girl's experience on the *Recovery*. The whips, ropes, and pulleys, just devices used in the case of the young girl, signal for those who do not experience it directly how their bodies and narratives no longer belong to them within this system and how they identify themselves becomes void of recognition. The young girl, according to Dowling's testimony, could not do what the other slaves did. He describes, "In this situation she could not eat, as the other slaves did, nor join in any of their amusements, at which the Captain was so irritated" (Student of the Temple 4). According to Dowling here, Kimber's irritation with her lack of performance that he wanted and expected to see provides another avenue for him to get a performance of another kind. The stripping that occurs of the slave women's bodies and identities pictured in the engraving and embedded in the trial seemingly reveal what

performances have been mandated to them in slavery and what happens when one deviates to create their own cultural responses. I do not primarily believe that the young girl on the *Recovery* is performing anything, or if I do I believe she is performing preservation of who she believes herself to be, or her true identity. However, there is a sense of performance that can be pulled back in layers when considering the engraving and the written documentation of the trial. Diana Taylor in her work *The Archive and the Repertoire* recognizes that "performance also constitutes the methodological lens that enables scholars to analyze events *as* performance" (Taylor 3). This lens for this close analysis of the murder of the young slave girl provides a way, along with the intersection of the body and material culture, to discuss her experience in a much more comprehensive way. Understanding the performative nature of a moment such as this makes this less about a named man in history with the power and agency for his story to be prominent but more about a young girl whose body tells those willing to look that she is stripped physically and in the process her identity is stripped as well leaving her with a desire to preserve herself though that places her in a moment where the final act of the suspension and beating lead to the end of her life. That is a hard narrative to consider, research, and speak of again, but it is what preserves what could have been fragments of the identity she would have preferred we had known and recreates the ways in which we research and discuss her and other eighteenth slave women we find all throughout the pre-nineteenth century texts.

Material Culture of Bondage

The stories and identities of pre-nineteenth century women seem to undergo this trajectory of stripping, preserving, and creating, especially when combining what material culture provides. The stripping of their identities and stories seem to come from the torture devices as introduced in the opening discussion of the Cruikshank's engraving and Kimber's

trial. One of the most riveting literary discussions of an eighteenth century woman comes from Olaudah Equiano's description of his encounter with a slave woman whose face is bound with a device that constricted the use of her mouth. In his description he writes:

> […] and the more so as I had seen a black woman slave as I came through the house, who was cooking the dinner, and the poor creature was cruelly loaded with various kinds of iron machines; she had one particularly on her head, which locked her mouth so fast that she could scarcely speak; and could not eat nor drink. I was much astonished and shocked at this contrivance, which I afterwards learned was called the iron muzzle. (Equiano 44)

Equiano's description shows this woman included in his narrative who becomes a visual representation of how torture devices work to strip identities of pre-nineteenth century women and subsequently muzzle their stories.

In Equiano's description, this woman's body is "cruelly loaded." Her bound mouth allows her to "scarcely speak," and the act of speaking or any movement of the head and mouth were restricted to make her uncomfortable. It is clear that she is uncomfortable because Olaudah Equiano himself is not comfortable. He expresses his astonishment and shock at the state of the seemly silenced and physically oppressed woman. Her bound state closes off her ability to easily eat, drink, and speak – all very vital parts of one's life and identity. For many of the pre-nineteenth century slave women whose lives began in a specific community in Africa, their identities and stories become vulnerable when the torture devices are used on them. While they had been known more individually by their communities, these devices make them slave and African (Carretta, *Phillis Wheatley: Biography of a Genius in Bondage* 2 and 4). The much larger stripping of their identities become particularly unusual with a closer analysis of how the

torture devices work on the women bound and beaten physically and mentally by the use of them.

While the slave woman loaded with the iron machines has with no ability or agency to share her story through verbal or written form, Equiano is able to write about it – to describe what he sees and how he feels. The woman who is the object of his description physically cannot do this in the state in which she is when he encounters her. We do not have her slave narrative that goes over the details of specific moments in her life or to know the specific moments that led to her being muzzled with the iron bit.[42] We do not have a first person description of what went through her mind every time she thought to speak when the muzzle was first attached to her neck and face. We know of her existence as a slave woman with an iron muzzle and have the archive of her body, but we can gather that at some point she speaks in a manner that does not fit the rhetoric being established during the evolving eighteenth century slave system. Equiano acknowledges that she can "scarcely speak," and that is an indication of a speaking woman, a woman with her own story and a body archive that supports that. Perhaps the person who had chosen this form of bondage had not been pleased with what this woman had to say or some form of insubordination that her master felt needed to be stopped. We will not know the details of what she said and how it moved the master or governing person who demanded that she be silenced and stripped of vital parts of her identity, but we do know that she must have said something involving the use of her body in some way that did not fit the narrative that the controlling group wanted to create and preserve.

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[42] I am interchangeably using iron bit and muzzle because for this project I believe them to be the same thing.

Figure 9 Resume du temoignage donne devant un comite de la chamber des communes de la Grande Bretagne de l'Irelande, touchant le traite des negres; Image Reference, as shown on www.slaveimages.org, compiled by Jerome Handler and Michael Tuite, and sponsored by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and the University of Virginia Library.

An interesting part of Equiano's description of the woman he encounters says "the poor creature was cruelly loaded with various kinds of iron machines" (44). He does not go into the detail about each of the machines because his focus falls on the iron constricting her head. The range of other iron materials laden on her body is wide. Iron, rope, and other devices used to increase the literal physical bondage provide evidence that the women's lived experiences are complicated and impacted in ways that bound them and their agency. Because of the ways in which material culture, torture/bondage devices in this section, play a part in their experiences, it is a more concrete marker of how their bodies and identities are stripped. These devices may provide answers to the concerns of voice, authentication, and narrative creation. While it seems on the surface level the women have been silenced, and many of the torture devices do have a design to do so, it is not the stopping place for the exploration of pre-nineteenth century slave women's narratives. In fact, some the torture devices may by implication acknowledge that the women do have voices and have spoken in some form. The control asserted with these devices does not always indicate why these particular instruments have been used to bound the women, but it shows that there is some type of reaction to some other action. Women who comply with the wishes of their masters would probably not require the additional devices to oppress and suppress.

The iron shackles pictured above left are one of the most readily identifiable bondage/torture devices of slavery. Their use primarily to restrict movement and strip the slaves

identity in connection with freedom points to the wide use of torture devices and their role in the stripping of identity. These more than likely bound the feet of the woman in Equiano's narrative. The archive of her body reveal the static ways in which pre-nineteenth century women's placement and location ranged and changed drastically at times from the previous movement of their journeys over the lands of their homes, the shores of Africa and Middle Passage.

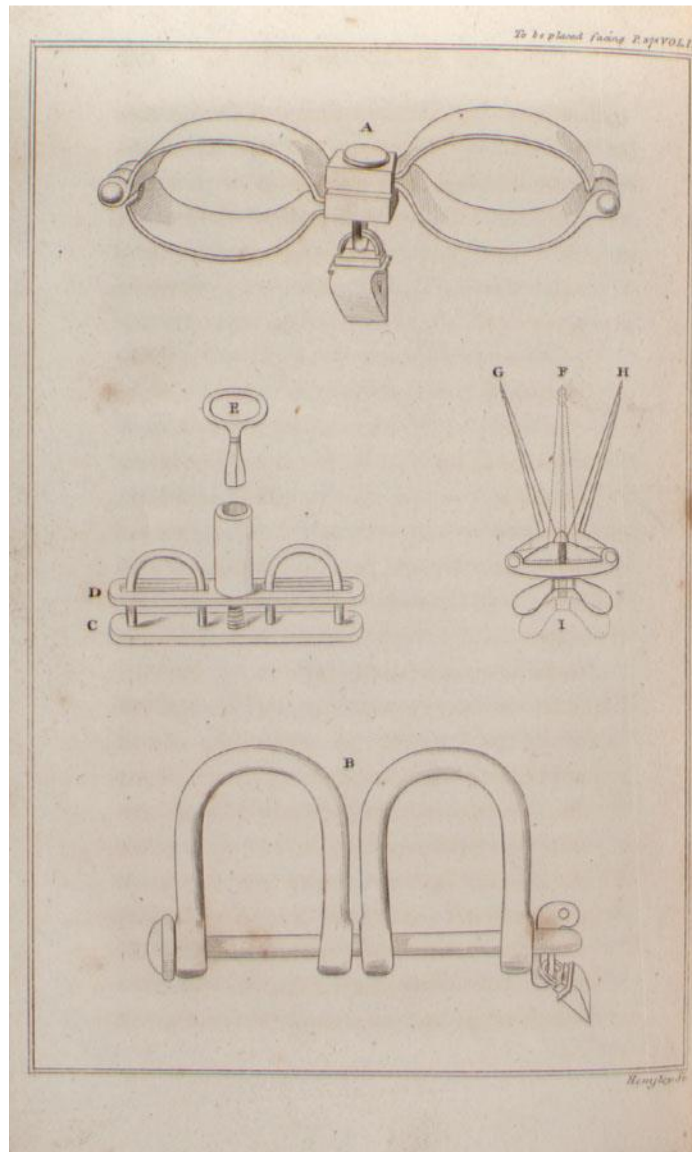

Figure 10 *Irons and Shackles Used on Slave Ships, late 18th cent.*; Image Reference F018, as shown on www.slaveimages.org, compiled by Jerome Handler and Michael Tuite, and sponsored by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and the University of Virginia Library

The ropes and various iron-clad devices indicate that the women are not silent. The materials used to promote oppression actually incite more questions about how they are used and typically when they are used with women. What do they voice that creates a reaction? What does their decision to not be silent show those in search of what they are saying? The speculations could grow with the use of imagination, but the look at the material culture of slavery with consideration of what the material culture is like in Africa can reveal some credible ideas of what would prompt the attempt to silence the women during their

experience. Considering the use of oppressive technologies elicit a more critical idea of who the women are. A more diverse range arises and the monolithic idea of a collective silent body of women becomes a place where we can zoom in and see a variety of "speaking" and sometimes resistant group of girls and women who are also producing their stories in ways not often understood within the scope of the societal standards of the evolving slave system in the Americas. She is desirable, aware, resistant, and capable of framing and constructing her narrative in a variety of ways, but the burgeoning system impacts her creations and subsequently how people then and now gather her stories and discuss them.[43]

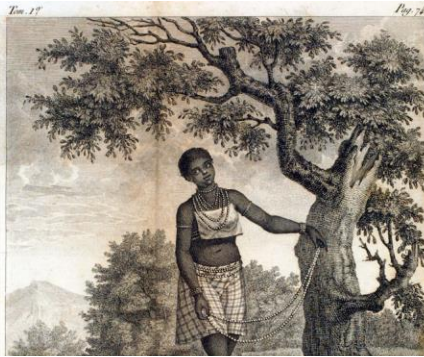

Figure 11 *Female Clothing, Angola, 1786-87*; Image Reference LCP-08, as shown on www.slaveimages.org, compiled by Jerome Handler and Michael Tuite, and sponsored by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and the University of Virginia Library

In Plain Sight: Clothing, Fragmented Narratives, and Preservation of Identities

Africa is such an enormous continent, and even considering most of the women forced into slavery come from the Western portion of the continent still leaves many varieties of cultures. In the midst of the considerable amount of traditions and productions, considering what material cultures of African communities offer provide insight into the pre-nineteenth century slave women's experiences. Whether they create and wear clothing, use agricultural products, or build games, this act of producing shows that the women have some type of intellectual and product contribution in their new

[43] The iron that touched the slave women's physical bodies are not the only ways in which they were impacted by the material culture of bondage. The sounds of the plantation played a role in the stripping of the women's identities that had been formed in their native communities. Plantation bells and horns created a "painful association" with unpleasant, humiliating, and degrading experiences (White and White 5–6).Sounds also became a way that slave women could preserve and create identities for themselves. Often disguised, the sounds of the slaves filled the areas they lived and worked with their own creations

communities in the Americas as they did while in their home communities. Based on the material culture of their distinctive groups, you can see their innovation and mostly individualized responses within any of the systems that they are born into that determines much of what they have access to and what they can express. It does not dismiss a cultural and/or societal influence, but it does show the space allowed within their groups and tribes to operate with more agency than is clearly found in the slave system being built in the Americas.

While some cultures in the West African region may have worn little to no clothing, some cultures have been recorded as having wardrobes and accessories. Different in many cases from Eurocentric clothing styles, the clothing of some Western African women provide coverage of their chest and mid to upper-lower region of their bodies. The engraving to the left shows a young African woman, noted as a princess in the description, in attire similar to a skirt for the lower portion of her body and a handkerchief type top to cover her immediate chest area as well as beads of some sort. While it is not clear beyond the description what clothing indicates within this particular culture, it does indicate production of material as well as some amount of expressive agency. Her story is not known directly from her tongue, and no accompanying descriptions point out that she has been or will ever be enslaved. However, this engraving of this woman possibly from the Congo[44] region increases the questions I have about what material culture could tell us about the pre-nineteenth century slave women. What specific skills did they bring to the Americas? Where can those skills be seen in the material culture of the Americas?

Clothes and accessories reveal much about eighteenth century slave women and could be used in ways that made their identities malleable to an extent. Bodices, petticoats, trousers, jackets, breeches, and even the lack of clothing played a major role in the narratives of

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[44] I would have to do more research to understand where she is from. “Malembe” may indicate a region we now know as Congo.

eighteenth century slave women and their identities. Articles of clothing are “powerful symbols of cultural and personal identity” (Baumgarten 113). Many pre-nineteenth century women found themselves in a paradox where the slave system introduces foreign clothing and the desire to hold on to the cultural and personal identity from which they were snatched from becomes difficult. Their desire to preserve who they are and what they know seems to have found itself in the material culture of the clothing they were able to access in some form or the other.

The hierarchical structures forming in the eighteenth century have somewhat of a uniform assignment for each group. The clothing became indicative of what type of work a person did and which group they “belonged” to. As pre-nineteenth century slave women continued their journeys on the slave ships, their captors already began dictating what they could wear. Slaves could only bring a small amount of accessories and clothing “allowed by their captors” (Baumgarten 133). The paradox that many eighteenth century women found themselves in is the slave system introduces foreign clothing and the desire to hold on to the cultural and personal identity from which they were snatched from becomes difficult. Their desire to preserve who they are and what they know seems to have found itself in the material culture of the clothing they were able to access in some form or the other.

The restriction for the slave women’s control over the production and individualization of their garments continued when they arrived on land. In some cases, professional tailors made slaves’ clothing – some masters like George Washington did not allow the slaves to make their own clothing under the premise that it would take too long for them to complete the work (Baumgarten 136). Purchasing the textile for the slaves’ clothing in bulk, masters solidified the inability for slaves to find variety or individuality among themselves and easily pinpointed in the static role of slave (Baumgarten 136). It seems a difficult task to preserve identity and narratives

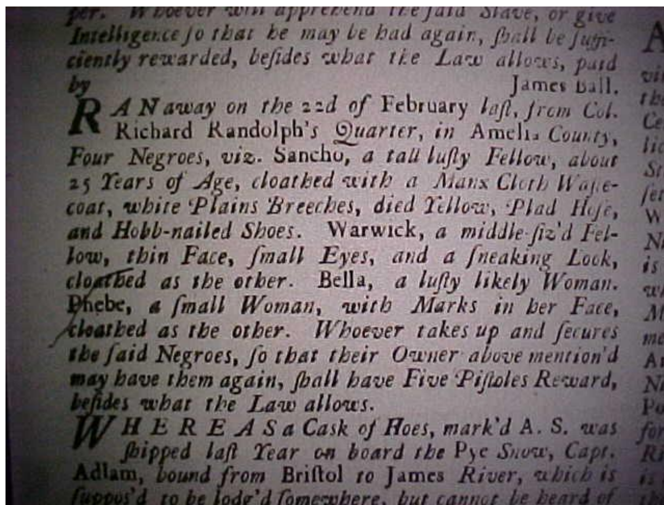
with such strictures being imposed. However, many pre-nineteenth century slave women did not allow this to consume their entire identity. Instead, they seem to show a clear understanding of what articles of clothing mean to their fit on the burgeoning hierarchical scales, showcasing their ability to preserve their identities and stitch together a narrative that not traditionally written by them.

Manipulating their clothing for preservation can be understood best in the descriptive urgency of the runaway slave ads that compiled the clothing last seen on the women, possible attire changes, and the implications of the clothing and performance. All of this shows that for some masters the bulk production of slave clothing and design had much more to do with systemic needs to remove the personal from the lives of the enslaved. As Baumgarten explores with her work, "The uniformity of clothing provided by slaveholders went beyond economics. Cognizant of the fact that distinctive clothing could instill individuality, dignity, and cultural identity, some slaveholders tried to prevent such personal expression" (Baumgarten 136). Nonetheless, these same characteristics would be what many slave women were willing to die for. And as noticed with the analysis of the young slave women depicted in the opening engraving by Cruikshank, some of them did.

The runaway slave ads show slave women who understood the ideology of clothing and the savvy used to employ clothes in their quest to preserve the identities underneath the slave clothes thrust upon them. Ranging from field working attire to higher rank clothing, the clothing of slave women described in the runaway slave ads show the variable ways that the women, their clothing, and their escape work together to move toward preserving their identities and providing pieces that scholars now use to better understand their narratives.

Many descriptions include a more mass produced Orzanbrig cloth, osnabrug shifts, Negro cotton, and other generic textiles used prominently for field working slaves. Within these sometimes generic descriptions emerges the narrative fragments and identity preservation of the escaping women. Whether last seen in clothing most associated with slaves or suspected of acquiring articles of clothing that help the women become a part of a free society, many of the pre-nineteenth century slave women understood how clothing could gain control of their identity in an attempt to preserve who they are in freedom.

For many of the women named in the runaway ads of the pre-nineteenth century, the clothing descriptions range from the sometimes absent and ambiguous, non-descriptive, nature of the ad (Figure 8) Bella and Phebe are described in as "cloathed as the other" (*The Geography of Slavery*). Whereas the men have a more particular description included with the ad, the women seem to be underestimated in terms of how clothing can be a tool to preserve what freedom they may find and for our contemporary concerns, the fragments of information they can leave behind for those interested in the narrative of their eighteenth century journey as a slave in the Americas. These Virginian eighteenth century slave women can represent the earlier concerns with the impact material culture has on the agency in terms of identity and non-privileged ways that the women worked to make their own narratives, documented in ways not often privileged by literary scholars.



Whoever will apprehend the ſaid Slave, or give Intelligence ſo that he may be had again, ſhall be ſufficiently rewarded, beſides what the Law allows, paid by

James Ball.

RAN away on the 22d of February laſt, from Col. Richard Randolph's Quarter, in Amelia County, Four Negroes, viz. Sancho, a tall luſty Fellow, about 25 Years of Age, cloathed with a Manx Cloth Waiſtcoat, white Plains Breeches, died Yellow, Plad Hoſe, and Hobb-nailed Shoes. Warwick, a middle-ſiz'd Fellow, thin Face, ſmall Eyes, and a ſneaking Look, cloathed as the other. Bella, a luſty likely Woman. Phebe, a ſmall Woman, with Marks in her Face, cloathed as the other. Whoever takes up and ſecures the ſaid Negroes, ſo that their Owner above mention'd may have them again, ſhall have Five Piſtoles Reward, beſides what the Law allows.

WHEREAS a Cask of Hoes, mark'd A. S. was ſhipped laſt Year on board the Pye Snow, Capt. Adlam, bound from Briſtol to James River, which is ſuppos'd to be lodg'd ſomewhere, but cannot be heard of

Figure 12 Slave advertisement. *The Geography of* Slavery. Compiled by Tom Costa and The Rector and visitors of the University of Virginia.

Bella and Phebe's unidentifiable clothing in the runaway ad placed by their master may signal how the power of clothing as a major part of pre-nineteenth century slave women's move to preserve their identity for the sake of freedom and lending a conscious or unconscious fragmented detail to their narrative. Many of these runaway slave ads before the nineteenth century provide more details for the men encapsulated in the ads. Identifying marks and clothing show the attention and concern with understanding the possible agency the men exhibit with the execution of their escapes. While women in some cases seem to be underestimated, the runaway ads do not offer much in terms of how clothing identifies the women and their status in the pre-nineteenth century Americas.

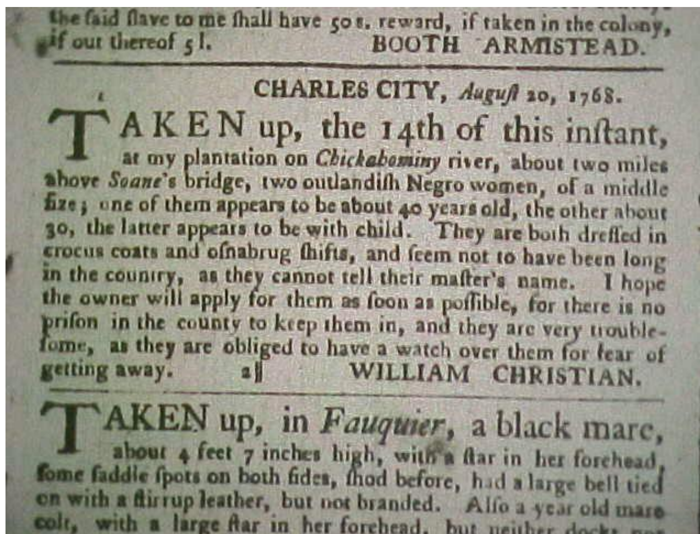
The personal nature of the runaway slave ads have and continue to provide for scholars the interesting intersection of what masters and other privileged non-enslaved people recognize about pre-nineteenth century slave women, and what these women, inadvertently are able to tell us hundreds of years later about their narrative. The material culture of clothing have shown and continue to show that pre-nineteenth century slave women were concerned with preserving their identity through freedom and could attempt and sometimes succeed through an escape using clothing as essential identifiers.

Interestingly, the lack of description for Belle and Phebe worked for them in the pre-nineteenth century as they disappeared among a population of women who may have been "cloathed as the other" (*The Geography of Slavery*). Their master may have been found at a disadvantage to recover these women, especially if they separated themselves from the men who they began their escape journey with. While the details of what they wore would be beneficial for a contemporary scholar eager to recover the lived experience of pre-nineteenth century slave women, these women seem to become the unrecognized predecessors of women such as Harriet

Jacobs whose nineteenth century work omitted and changed her story in order secure safety for herself and others. Belle and Phebe may have found the advantageous nature of the slave uniform and the ability to become the “slave woman,” which they would have been expected to look like in public. In the newspaper, the story of Belle and Phebe seem to be generic, but this moment is pivotal for these women. The generic nature of the ad provide a nod to their existence and how they value their freedom which may have been an essential part of their identity back in their home communities in Africa.

It seems that every little clothing detail of pre-nineteenth century slave women’s lives become one of the sites for the recovery of their complex identities and narratives. The clothing provided an opportunity for the women to showcase their understanding of the slave system’s markers and use those markers to, even if unconsciously, imbed who they were and what their stories are in plain sight. Moving beyond the more generic descriptions of slave women in runaway ads and considering those descriptions that recognize the possible ways in which the women were able to use clothing in their escape to move toward preserving their identity in freedom.

More identifiable clothing descriptions found in runaway ads before the nineteenth century highlight the distinctions in the work roles of the women in the slave system in which many of them fell. The details of the osnabrug shifts, Negro cotton, and other simple clothing items can show the status



the ſaid ſlave to me ſhall have 50 s. reward, if taken in the colony, if out thereof 5 l. BOOTH ARMISTEAD.

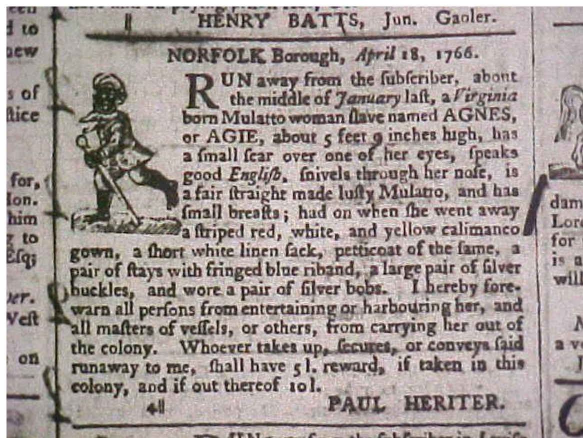
CHARLES CITY, *Auguſt* 20, 1768.

TAKEN up, the 14th of this inſtant, at my plantation on *Chickahominy* river, about two miles above *Soane*'s bridge, two outlandiſh Negro women, of a middle ſize; one of them appears to be about 40 years old, the other about 30, the latter appears to be with child. They are both dreſſed in crocus coats and oſnabrug ſhifts, and ſeem not to have been long in the country, as they cannot tell their maſter's name. I hope the owner will apply for them as ſoon as poſſible, for there is no priſon in the county to keep them in, and they are very troubleſome, as they are obliged to have a watch over them for fear of getting away. 2 WILLIAM CHRISTIAN.

TAKEN up, in *Fauquier*, a black mare, about 4 feet 7 inches high, with a ſtar in her forehead, ſome ſaddle ſpots on both ſides, ſhod before, had a large bell tied on with a ſtirrup leather, but not branded. Alſo a year old mare colt, with a large ſtar in her forehead, but neither docks nor

Figure 13 Slave advertisement. *The Geography of* Slavery. Compiled by Tom Costa and The Rector and visitors of the University of Virginia.

that may be part of their story and the identities that want to escape from in order to preserve the identity that they want to return to. Osnabrug shifts signal the women to be workers, particularly in the field. In the Virginian runaway ad in Figure 9 above, “two outlandish Negro women” who are dressed in “crocus coats and osnabrug shifts” have been in the Americas a short amount of time as indicated by their suggested inability to “tell their master’s name” (*The Geography of Slavery*). This description of these women and their clothing show how the clothing items can indicate time frames for which the women fit. The more bulk descriptions of Negro cotton and various shifts lend information about the type of work and location of the plantation, but when considering time frames of women and what they are introduced to as their narratives move from the relative safety of their communities to the chaotic moments throughout their journey to the Americas and the type of slave system it is building. The disheveled nature of their journey contributed to the fragmented nature of their narratives, and by picking up details of clothing that this particular ad provides, fragments of time can be considered, continuing the discussion of when pre-nineteenth century women worked to preserve their identity and write their own stories with their use of material culture.


HENRY BATTS, Jun. Gaoler.

NORFOLK Borough, *April* 18, 1766.

RUN away from the ſubſcriber, about the middle of *January* laſt, a *Virginia* born Mulatto woman ſlave named AGNES, or AGIE, about 5 feet 9 inches high, has a ſmall ſcar over one of her eyes, ſpeaks good *Engliſh*, ſnivels through her noſe, is a fair ſtraight made luſty Mulatto, and has ſmall breaſts; had on when ſhe went away a ſtriped red, white, and yellow calimanco gown, a ſhort white linen ſack, petticoat of the ſame, a pair of ſtays with fringed blue riband, a large pair of ſilver buckles, and wore a pair of ſilver bobs. I hereby forewarn all perſons from entertaining or harbouring her, and all maſters of veſſels, or others, from carrying her out of the colony. Whoever takes up, ſecures, or conveys ſaid runaway to me, ſhall have 5 l. reward, if taken in this colony, and if out thereof 10 l.

PAUL HERITER.

Figure 14 Slave advertisement. *The Geography of* Slavery. Compiled by Tom Costa and The Rector and visitors of the University of Virginia.

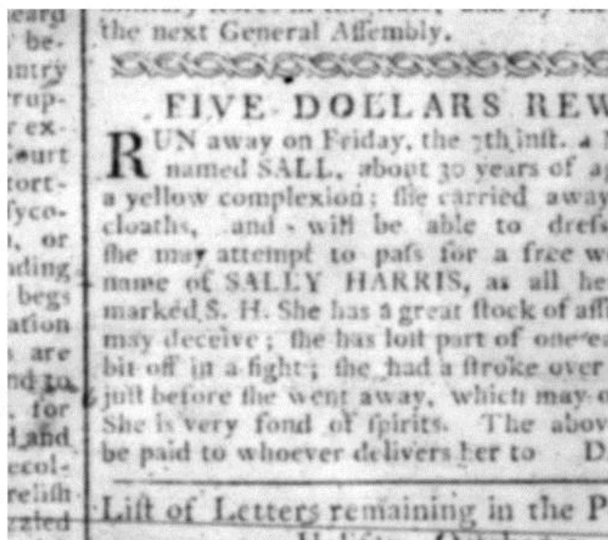
Other runaway slave ads appear in newspapers with the detailed descriptions of the clothing worn by the escaped women and the implications of the clothing and its value to their identity when amongst free people. In the Figure 10 to the left, Agnes (Agie), the woman described has a much more detailed, colorful attire. According to the ad, she wore a “striped red, white and yellow calimanco gown, a short white

linen sack, petticoat of the same, a pair of stays with fringed blue riband, a large pair of silver buckles, and wore a pair of silver bobs" (*The Geography of Slavery*). The red, white, and yellow colors and the blue "riband" signal that freedom would offer Agnes an opportunity to work on preserving her individuality and carving out her own narrative. She also has other advantages when considering the description that she is a mulatto "fair straight made" and "speaks good English" (*The Geography of Slavery*). If clothing as detailed by runaway slave ads is any indication of pre-nineteenth century slaves women's stories, this ad and Agnes' story provide a complex set of fragments. Agnes has clothing different from the previously discussed generic cloth and even as accessories – the silver bobs. How do slave women like Agnes access these clothing items, especially if clothing in the pre-nineteenth century often designates the status of the wearer? Her race distinction, the amount of time elapsed since she was last seen and the ads publication, her grasp on the master's language all point to how clothing as a material culture item show the complexities of pre-nineteenth century slave women's narratives and their work to preserve their identities.

The process of being brought into slavery, or being a first generation slave born in the Americas as Agnes' ad suggests, presented a situation that fueled the stripping of identity. As shown with the chapter's opening discussion of the engraving and a woman's stance to hold on to who she is – and for this particular woman it is her virtue – it is a difficult moment when the system seems to be designed to strip the identities of the women, taking from many of them what they hold to be the last thing they own. The preservation of that identity is seen in what can be termed an outright rejection, in which that young woman used clothing that resembles that of the master to show a refusal to the command of the master. Acts similar to this with the clothing that women had access becomes an important part of the fragmentary narrative of pre-nineteenth

century women whose bodies have the general focus that all enslaved bodies have but the gendered experience places their bodies in a particular gaze. What we then can gather from the fragments of the descriptions of clothing and how they work with the women's circumstances is that the clothing seems to become indelible for the enslaved women working to preserve their identity. With their actions, their complex stories arise from these descriptions documented in part because of their decisions to not succumb to the notions that their identities would only be completely stripped.

For some enslaved women who accessed changes of clothes that would give them a better opportunity to preserve their identity seem to have been able to complicate their masters' continued work to strip their identities. It can be noticed in the runaway ad (Figure 11) placed in the newspaper to find Sall, a female slave around 30 years old. Her presumed master, David Day, clearly notes the "good many cloths [sic]" Sall took with her and her ability to "dress very well" (*The Geography of Slavery*). Day's observation and inclusion of the change of wardrobe and her potential social status change support how enslaved pre-nineteenth century women may have used the clothing and their implications to make an escape in an effort to create their identities and subsequently providing pieces that can be used to form a more complicated narrative of their lives.



the next General Aſſembly.

FIVE DOLLARS REW

RUN away on Friday, the 7th inſt. a N
named SALL, about 30 years of ag
a yellow complexion; ſhe carried away
cloaths, and will be able to dreſs
ſhe may attempt to paſs for a free wo
name of SALLY HARRIS, as all her
marked S. H. She has a great ſtock of aſſu
may deceive; ſhe has loſt part of one ea
bit off in a fight; ſhe had a ſtroke over
juſt before ſhe went away, which may oc
She is very fond of ſpirits. The above
be paid to whoever delivers her to DA

Liſt of Letters remaining in the Po

Figure 15 Slave advertisement. *The Geography of* Slavery. Compiled by Tom Costa and The Rector and visitors of the University of Virginia.

The pre-nineteenth century narrative for the slave system begins to take place in the transatlantic movement of the people being carried by force to areas away from the African continent. The fluid movement gave pre-nineteenth century slave women brought from their various homes across the continent a much more diverse narrative than the women born in the new bound home. Coming to grips with new languages as well as encountering many different material cultures makes the task of sharing stories, speaking and writing narratives, and preserving and creating identities even more difficult under a systemic bondage. That is what makes the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries somewhat different from the nineteenth century because you do have more slaves and free black people writing within the privileged tradition of Eurocentric writing, and some of them suffering the consequences of having written explicitly about their experience and sharing how they feel. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are more transformative in most facets of the Americas with lots of movement and establishment of plantations and new modes of productions. The slave women are forced into these many moving pieces impacting how they transform as they move from, in some cases, little girls of specific communities and families to property and eventually come of age as slave women. In other cases women become property yet are not fully able to separate themselves from roles they once knew in freedom, such as mother or royalty who contributed to the material culture of their home community. How do you create narratives in such a situation? What and how could you create the narrative once it is decided upon? How does this transformative derailment show up in what material productions they encounter or create? What stories are hidden within the material culture? What can material culture show us about their stories?

Pen and paper, whips, chains, iron bits, and pottery do not automatically seem like material culture texts that have much in common from a perspective that is heavily dependent on the critical analysis of literary texts. Yet, they all influence the ways in which pre-nineteenth century slave women produce their stories in various ways ranging from written texts to material items. While literary studies has an understandable emphasis on written texts, the material culture of slavery provides another intersection where pre-nineteenth century slave women's experiences can meet to develop a clearer idea of the experiences from our contemporary position. The availability and enforcement of the material items, some of which are introduced for the first time to the captive women as they followed the forced paths of their kidnappers, become integral to the ways in which the women can frame and share their narratives that are not all recorded or written with a considerable amount of agency. The material items obviously oppress them, but the women do not become swallowed up completely in the oppressive stems of this system. With the critical consider of material culture along with the scholarship of material culture from various schools of thought, we can better understand the ways in which these women's identities have been stripped, forged in new ways, and preserved.

When the women emerge as slave women in the system of what would be more readily known as American slavery, their individual identities have been stripped in many ways, and the remnants of their former identities seemingly dissolved to their physical features, their language that they desperately use to communicate for some type of understanding, and countless productions that do not fit the Eurocentric expectations for sharing experiences. The experiences of their recent past swirl together with memories near and distant as well as inexplicable feelings about the large amount of water that they passed over and the state of humans they were both a part of as well as distant from. The women came to an intersection that forcefully removed

certain parts of their identity while the system and masters within the system worked to make them new identities. The women work to hold on to who they had been before this transatlantic transformation. Material culture greatly impacted this pivotal identity moment, and it can help us better understand portions of the women's stories. What do they bring with them, and how can we know that they brought it with them? What are other fragments of their narrative tied to identity and experience? What kind of fragments come from scholarly approaches that take us from the written page, and how can those various avenues intersect in ways to better understand what seem like silences and gaps in the narratives of pre-nineteenth century slave women?

These questions led me to think about how the scholarly work of the material culture of the pre-nineteenth century for slave women can be combined with literary analysis to think of ways to approach the experiences of the women and create clearer, more complex narrative of the women who lived, transformed, survived, and died during this time. While the more Eurocentric literary ideal of the privileged written word encounters the cultural preference for oral tradition for many of the slave women, many forms can be overlooked when considering what is left behind to understand the experiences of pre-nineteenth century slave women in more depth.

For the pre-nineteenth century slave women forced to embark upon this unlikely journey, the transport and the immersion into new languages and writing practices placed them in positions that impacted the ways they shared their narratives when and if given the opportunity. While the journey and new forms of communication are plenty for the slave women to deal with, the material culture of their communities, the ship, and the places they encounter impact the ways in which we consider the written texts and other forms of communication that the women use or are recorded as using. It actually helps us continuously think of a variety of ways in which

we approach the recovery of stories and experiences by better understanding different forms that offer a better understanding of what the women could share and how they could share it. Some of those ways of speaking can be seen in material culture produced by their own hands or exhibited through the creation of material culture by others.

The amount of material culture influencing and revealing the narratives of pre-nineteenth century slave women also have an impression on the ways in which we consider what the women had to say or attempt to say, and every other way of leaving a piece of their story, about the experiences they had within the slave system. The whips, chains, and other torture devices along with the paintings and clothing of the time period have provided avenues in which contemporary scholars and readers have considered and discussed slavery. Within literary studies, a more predominate focus on literary texts in isolation benefits from the study of material culture and what multiple disciplines understand generally about slavery and more specifically about pre-nineteenth century slave women. In areas where it seems that the women have been silenced or contributed nothing personally in terms of what privileged communication forms are typically recognized, it is actually a place to stop and critically think more about what other disciplines with more emphasis on material culture offers to us to regard about the various things that affect how the women communicate. Material culture and disciplines that work to study and unearth them have stories that can be overlooked if there is less infusion of our critical approach with what we know about pre-nineteenth century slave women who come from cultural areas that preserved and shared their stories in ways other than a privileged, organized form of written communication with symbols. By looking at the material culture left behind and critically analyzing them, we can recover more and understand more clearly about the complex lives of pre-nineteenth century women in the Americas.

Chapter 4

Pre-nineteenth Century Slave Women Reimagined

Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
- Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise"

People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.

~James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son

As the previous chapters of this project have shown, little is known specifically of the journey of pre-nineteenth century women from their home communities. The archive does not have those unadulterated first-person accounts of enslaved women in the time period. This understanding drives the interdisciplinary research approaches as evidenced through work done with material culture. From the literary perspective, Phillis Wheatley's work shows a pre-nineteenth century woman writing but not in the ways that fulfill contemporary longings and reveals limitations when using the primary works of a pre-nineteenth century woman who has been authenticated and therefore restrained.

The little that is known through more privileged, accepted forms of written preservation have left many concerned with pre-nineteenth century slavery in general and pre-nineteenth century slave women specifically with a quest to build the narrative of the unknown and understand their stories. The narratives and stories we long for are not readily available with small amounts of effort, and the journey to better craft and consider the unknown story of pre-nineteenth century slave women metaphorically seems to replicate features of the Middle Passage they crossed over. It is extremely vast and carries many people and identities we hope we can find more about. However, modern authors and artists of all genres do not give up easily on the desire to shape and mold significant stories that sometimes carry the weight of known

history and look to alleviate the burden of what is not known about history.

Hortense Spillers' concern with gender and the archival gaps provides context for the importance of contemporary literature such as the neo-slave narrative. She writes, "The relative silence of the record on this point constitutes a portion of the disquieting lacunae that feminist investigation seeks to fill. Such silence is the nickname of distortion, of the unknown human factor that a revised public discourse would both undo and reveal" (Spillers 73). For scholars and artists like Morrison, exploring the archives and pushing the boundaries help continue revisions to the discourse in order to remove limitations that distort the ways in which we think of enslaved women within historical context. Contemporary literature begins the conversations that attempt to think beyond the few known facts and work to get to the stories of the women whose lived experiences are fragmented in various ways of what we have left.

Toni Morrison with her novel *A Mercy* takes on the task of reimagining an experience with no first-hand experience. What we can gather from her steps to reimagine this particular time in history is that they return again and again calling for a better understanding of what the gaps indicate and what can be understood about the experiences of African slaves collectively and individually, but for the purpose of this project, pre-nineteenth century slave women specifically. Morrison with *A Mercy* creates spaces for narratives that design a world that helps us think more about what we could know about the "interior lives" of the enslaved women not found in the archive. With the first person narratives, women's bodies, and material culture, she shows how these intersections both in the archives and in literature can help us understand the multiple voices in the Americas before the nineteenth century. Just as this project continues the conversations about limitations, archive, and public memory, Morrison's fiction does similar work to move beyond the limitations and create a newer archive that involves more than the

traditional archival presence that often gets privileged. Additionally, Morrison's work reveals the connections between neoslave narratives, the limitations of primary material as it relates to enslaved women, and the engagement of material culture and the archive of the body.

Neo-slave narratives emerged prominently with the 1966 arrival of Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*, a story built from the stories shared with Walker who mingled them with her own questions and contending answers that many considering slavery in general have. Her fictional narrative's setting focuses on the nineteenth century. Walker also takes the women's narrative and places it in the forefront of her fictive work illuminating the issues surrounding enslaved women in the Americas. The emergence of the neo-slave narrative in the sixties gave authors the opportunity to create commentary on the history of slavery and the ways in which that history had been handled. More specifically, authors of these narratives could "make a critical comment about the historiographical tradition whose often romanticized representation of slavery was enabled by the exclusion of firsthand African American perspectives on the 'peculiar institution'" (Rushdy 6). Just as the slave narratives had been a written expression of the experiences of those who could write and share their stories, the neo-slave narrative became that for contemporary writers grappling with the longings for a history of multiple voices to answer questions that for many need answers. There is an appreciation of the slave narratives and other writings that contribute to the more complex narrative of the time period before the nineteenth century, and the contemporary writers show their recognition of the limitations of the works and the need for a form that helps deal with it.

Slave narratives have been essential to understanding enslaved people's experiences and have an impact on the desires we have to know more about their lived experiences. Frances Smith Foster in *Witnessing Slavery* places an incredible focus on the slave narratives and how

the personal accounts shaped African-American literature. She considers Ralph Ellison's idea about the "need to discover what in our background is really worth preserving" (qtd. in Foster 153). Contemporary authors have been diligent in their discoveries, and many have found that the courage of slaves harnessed in their telling of their story while carving their moments in history with the ability to speak when silence may have been easier is really worth preserving. Toni Morrison is a contemporary author that recognizes the value of "preserving" this history if not just the tradition of telling one's story. Just as the women whose stories we diligently search for in material culture and literary texts found ways to preserve their identities, Morrison does so as well. With her novel *Beloved*, set in nineteenth century America, she re-imagines what a slave mother would say and focuses on the love of a slave mother who, out of this love, kills her baby girl to save her from the life of slavery. Though traumatic, Morrison privileges this fictional account that preserves the complexity of the lived experience of those who did or did not survive slavery and gives voice to the individual impact of slavery imposed on this particular woman. An extension of this discussion of the individual impact of slavery on others arises again in Morrison's *A Mercy*, from the mother's perspective. As Florens' mother explains, "to be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 196). Within this complex relationship that servitude creates and through the re-imagining of history through literature, it gives a foundation to better understand the experience of what becomes a dominating institution of slavery and how it affects enslaved women. With all of this in mind, I argue that Morrison, in her novel *A Mercy*, dives into the collective body to find the individual human body, break the silence, and weave in material culture to complicate the archive that has little for those enslaved women from Africa scattered through the Americas. She also illuminates

the tragedy of enslavement. From her reimagining, scholars have a site for analysis and discussion that can be used at the intersection of recovery, history, and other theoretical and scholarly concerns.

Morrison's return to the slavery in her most recent novel *A Mercy* is filled with a myriad of "tellings" bound together by the beginnings of what would become legalized slavery. It is interesting that in 2008 she returns to this subject of servitude highlighting pieces of perspective which complicates more than ever an already multilayered moment in history. Deborah McDowell posed several questions when she considered what it means to witness slavery after freedom in her analysis of *Dessa Rose*:

> Why the compulsion to repeat the massive story of slavery in contemporary Afro-American novel, especially so long after the empirical event itself? Is it simply because contemporary writers can "witness" slavery from a "safe" vantage point of distance? What personal need, what expressive function, does representing slavery in narrative serve the twentieth-century black American writer? Is the retelling meant to attempt the impossible: to "get it right," to "set the record straight?" (144)

These questions are valuable when considering any contemporary novel that has a setting in slavery and has characters that are slaves, masters, or some role that fits into the slave system. Morrison has visited a portion of this time period with her novel *Beloved*, but this time her turn to a much earlier time period of servitude is more encompassing, revealing the possible individual experiences of a time period that historically has silenced "all but the master voices" (Lidinsky 192). She pulls forward enslaved women's stories, placing in the background the "master voices" and putting to test the silence and gaps those voices hoped would permanently limit marginal voices.

A Mercy establishes different ways that the impact of servitude can be re-imagined and useful in the twenty-first century, especially in the context of how to understand and build a more complex set of narratives of pre-nineteenth century slave women. Within each of the accounts given by those of different races, different genders, and different classes, Morrison extends the re-imagination beyond specific information of the profits made and the general information of the humanity lost. What we then see from her work is a range of people, especially women, complicating the ways in which we consider the lived experiences of women before the nineteenth century. The layers of limitation created around what we know about enslaved women get peeled back with Morrison's re-imagining of these experiences.

Morrison's desire to "separate race from slavery" brings together a diverse conglomerate of people whose experiences intertwine and then bring light to the traumatic affects servitude had on all people in *A Mercy* (Interview with Lynn Neary). With this novel, Morrison moves beyond the representative neo-slave narrative and provides the representations of slaves within a complex and diverse environment. With this novel, she becomes one of the "contemporary Afro-American writers who tell a story of slavery […] increasingly aiming for the same thing: to reposition the stress points of that story with a heavy accent on particular acts of agency within an oppressive and degrading system" (McDowell 160). The "acts of agency" she employs in this novel allows her to use the diverse characters to exhibit the bodily scars and changes, use their silence to speak, and pull in material culture to show the multiple voices lining the layers of what we know about this realm of slavery. Through all of this, the history of individual slave women are seen in some facet as Morrison uses her writing to show this history in the makings of the institution of slavery as it is largely known in the Americas.

Since servitude and its subsequent institutionalization becomes a legalized human slave

trade, Morrison's ability to reveal the interior stories of women in this traumatic time period is useful. Laurie Vickroy explains, "trauma can be a powerful indicator of oppressive cultural institutions and practices" (4). For many African-American and Afro-Caribbean authors, slavery continues to haunt their literature even though it seems to diminish as time moves forward; however, "it seems to loom larger in the black literary imagination" (Keizer 1). That which looms in the black literary imagination that Morrison uses in *A Mercy* allows her to approach and offer issues for contemporary societies to consider in terms of servitude and the makings of slavery as some may or may not know according to historical accounts. Traumatic experiences can be worthwhile in the ability to allow Morrison to "raise many uncomfortable issues for public and professionals alike with regard to believability, personal agency and responsibility, perpetrators of trauma in society, and whether the world is a just and safe place" (Vickroy 18). Raising these concerns help with the connection to the need for continuous recovery of past experiences like those of pre-nineteenth century slave women, which impacts the scholarly and contemporary concerns – especially our longings to find the details of enslaved women – with this major moment in history, which reappears everywhere in contemporary life.

Because of the nature of trauma experienced during slavery, it becomes difficult to imagine the lived experiences of the enslaved women whose stories were not a priority in the preservation process. Trauma and traumatic experiences[45] can stem from varied moments and

[45] Trauma and traumatic experiences can be considered medical conditions that humans can suffer from individually. There are many theorists and medical doctors who pose compelling discussions on diagnoses that stem from trauma. At this time I do not find it appropriate to discuss the more particular implications of disorders associated with trauma. As I complicate Morrison's use of trauma in her novel set in the seventeenth century and being read in the twenty-first century, I do not find it fair at this moment (nor do I have the qualifications) to use contemporary terms with any of the characters, Morrison, or a collective body of humans, whether descendants of slaves or free people. I will focus my discussion on the psychic trauma theories that illuminate how trauma works within literature and lives of contemporary readers

experiences that can manifest in numerous ways. For the duration of this analysis of Morrison's work and the use of trauma, I will consider Cathy Caruth's idea of what it means to be traumatized:

> To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event. And thus the traumatic symptom cannot be interpreted, simply, as a distortion of reality, nor as the lending of unconscious meaning to a reality it wishes to ignore, nor as the repression of what once was wished. (4–5)

With *A Mercy*, Morrison shows how the trauma of the larger event of transatlantic slavery plays out in the lives of the particular characters as well as the collective body that fills the pages as well. She does not attempt to view these traumatic experiences as "distortion of reality." Her fictional account allows contemporary readers to try and access what enslaved women's experiences are like even if traumatic and do so in ways that trauma narratives[46] provide the site for this access. Vickroy shares that trauma narratives are significant among other discourses such as artistic, scholarly, and testimonial representations (2). *A Mercy* becomes significant in that within the novel there is a constant component of a trauma narrative of each character, and each character's narrative is woven together. It is with trauma from a historical standpoint that Morrison really gets to show the way in which cultures connect. As Cathy Caruth indicates:

> [T]he history of a trauma, in its inherent belatedness, can only take place through the listening of another […] This speaking and this listening – a speaking and a listening

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and how this affects their reception and understanding of history and the re-imagining

[46] At this time I am not arguing that Morrison's novel is a trauma narrative as a whole. I am arguing that she does use the trauma narrative within the novel to reveal the traumas of the characters in particular and historical trauma as a collective. Vickroy does recognize Morrison as a serious trauma writer. She writes, "[S]erious trauma writers attempt to guide readers through a re-created process of traumatic memory in order that this experience be understood more widely, as in Morrison's *Beloved"* (8).

> from the site of trauma – does not rely, I would suggest, on what we simply know of each other, but on what we don't yet know of our own traumatic pasts. In a catastrophic age, that is trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures: not as a simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves. (11)

Morrison acknowledges what we do not know of our past with the opening of the novel. She writes, "Don't be afraid. My telling can't hurt you in spite of what I have done and I promise to lie quietly in the dark – weeping perhaps or occasionally seeing the blood once more – but I will never again unfold my limbs to rise up and bare teeth" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 3). The concern with pain, sorrow, and blood show some factors that on one hand effected the ways in which the women shared their stories and on the other hand some of the barriers in place as we recover fragments of their experiences. This opening could "be read as the beginning of a confession of heartbreak and anger, on a more metaphorical level it can be seen as an urging not to fear the telling of a broader, different American origins narrative" (Babb 149). The strand of their stories and how we consider them require a more fearless approach to the topic and the challenges. In this opening statement, Morrison seems to invite readers to the stories not well known for whatever reasons – an incomplete archive, emotional concerns, or unexpected consequences. Those should not stand in the way because as this opening suggests, an attack will not occur.

Setting the tone this way allows Morrison to preface what we know – stories are scattered yet they can be available if we can embrace what we do not know and not add to the limitations already set by the archive. As Morrison indicates in "The Site of Memory,"

> If writing is thinking and discovery and selection and order and meaning, it is also awe

> and reverence and mystery and magic. I suppose I could dispense with the last four if I were not so deadly serious about fidelity to the milieu out of which I write and in which my ancestors actually lived. Infidelity to that milieu - the absence of the interior life, the deliberate excising of it from the records that the slaves themselves told - is precisely the problem in the discourse that proceeded without us. (Morrison, "The Site of Memory" 92)

Morrison's writing counters the records with little to no indication of lived experiences. She recognizes that the enslaved had specific experiences though a fragmented archive tells otherwise. As Valerie Babb in "E Pluribus Unum" adds, "Retelling the origins of the United States to explore the social complexity deleted from canonized narratives is a vast task" (Babb 149). As Morrison has shown again with *A Mercy*, it is a worthwhile task. Including the narratives of enslaved women in various forms, Morrison shows the essence of understanding of enslaved women hidden in archives is in their individual stories left in many forms.

The structure of *A Mercy* serves as a powerful indicator of the challenges that the archive represents for those researching, recovering, and reimagining enslaved women. The fragmented narrative mirrors the process of a search and the availability of details. Readers are instructed to release their fears, which seem to ask them to be open to an unorthodox story that requires multiple voices in the midst of multiple experiences. She de-centers the privileged, traditional, white male voice by embedding Jacob Vaark's, the slave owner, perspective within two enslaved women's tellings. What the opening requests and setting asks readers to recognize are the significance of the enslaved women's stories and how and where they intersect and reveal more details. The ingredients for the archive and the audience pull together the personal nature of

humanity, the questions, the missing, and the material culture, reminding us of the many types of fragments that we will encounter. Morrison writes:

> You can think what I tell you a confession, if you like, but one full of curiosities familiar only in dreams and during those moments when a dog's profile plays in the steam of a kettle. Or when a corn-husk doll sitting on a shelf is soon splaying in the corner of a room and the wicked of how it got there is plain. Stranger things happen all the time everywhere. You know. I know you know. One question is who is responsible? Another is can you read? If a pea hen refuses to brood I read it quickly and, sure enough, that night I see a minha mãe standing hand in hand with her little boy, my shoes jamming the pocket of her apron. (Morrison, *A Mercy* 3–4)

The combination of literacy, stories, and abstract reality show us in this portion of the opening that the approach to an enslaved woman's individual story requires curiosity. It calls for an openness to what may be characterized as unfathomable. It asks for a reading, but not always a literal reading. Her structure beacons for the questioning and longing that drive many underneath the unknowns in the archive. Morrison continues, "Other signs need more time to understand. Often there are too many signs, or a bright omen clouds up too fast. I sort them and try to recall, yet I know I am missing much, like not reading the garden snake crawling up to the door saddle to die. Let me start with what I know for certain" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 4). Morrison invokes the time needed to understand some signs and the understanding to be afforded to enslaved women who themselves work through their recollections. How we read them and their experiences cannot be in only privileged traditional forms but with approaches that would have us understand their fragments as what they know and what we can know from that.

Chiara Cillerai in her discussion of Morrison's *A Mercy* describes the novel as "representing cosmopolitanism's connections to forced geographical movements, to economic developments, and to socially and racially determined disparities." She continues, "*A Mercy* questions the way the characters communicate with each other, the way the reader wants to understand the characters' relationships with one another, and the characters' connections to the places they come from or inhabit" (Cillerai 179). Wrapped in the structure of the novel are all of these representative moments at once orbiting the human lives of enslaved women. The narratives have not been neatly arranged or received as only one story. As Lisa Logan states, "Through overlapping entangled histories that complicate notions of a simple, coherent past, the novel stages recent transformations in literary and historical studies, showing both the limits and possibilities of the archive" (Logan 194). Morrison shows through her structure that the archive can be more than an economic, slave trade driven resource. It can be a human centered site where our knowledge and understanding can put together various puzzles of lived experiences that do not marginalize enslaved women.

Another way Morrison makes important structural moves is to center Florens, a slave woman, as the primary seeker of her mother's story, builder of her own story, and representative of those who long to know of ancestral, generational, familial details. Jean Wyatt in her piece "Failed Messages, Maternal Loss, and Narrative Form" recognizes in interesting ways how Florens' main focus is her mother's message that Wyatt sees as "failed messages between slave mother and slave daughter" (Wyatt 128). The notion of the messages being "failed" is up for debate, but the impact of messages misplaced or broken do make Florens an important site throughout the structure of the novel to consider the search of the archives. Florens' longing only has a piece of her mother's story. Early in the novel she recounts it, "Sir saying he will take

instead the woman and the girl, not the baby boy and the debt is gone. A minha mãe begs no. Her baby boy is still at her breast. Take the girl she says, my daughter, she says. Me. Me" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 8). This moment takes readers to many other perspectives without losing the longing for the enslaved women's lived experiences using what can be understood mostly through Florens. With her at the beginning and centering the majority of the story while her mother ends with the beginning, Morrison tells the story of the archive, of recovery, and of people whose longings fuel their research and approaches to understanding enslaved women's lives before the nineteenth century.

Gendered Experience

Morrison provides a narrative space for enslaved women in *A Mercy*. As this project has shown, the problematic archive holds little for those desiring to recover the lived experiences of an eighteenth century slave woman. It is clear that the flawed approach that stems for that particular longing may add frustration and challenges, with questions outweighing the answers. When we consider our questions of personal detail, transition, location, and many others, Morrison points to the woman. The women in this story present to readers the diversity that existed, even if the archive does not show it to us. With Florens' mother, Morrison shows how the archive comes to know the enslaved women as more of a conglomerate instead of the many different women in the headcount. Readers only know of her mother throughout the narrative from others' points of view and do not know her mother's perspective until the end of the novel. She writes, "I was not a person from my country, nor from my families. I was negrita. Everything. Language, dress, gods, dance, habits, decoration, song – all of it cooked together in the color of my skin" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 194). Knowing her mother's story first could have provided some direction for gathering her and her daughter's stories along with those of the other

women. Florens' mother recognizes what happened to her on the transatlantic journey and names many of the types of details that we wish we could answer for so many enslaved women. The recollection of moments such as this shows more of the interior life of a woman who comes to terms with this when trying to digest what this type of life will mean for her daughter who will not truly get to inherit the "language, dress, gods, dance, habits, decoration, song" all because of skin color that is a marker for enslavement.

This marker for enslavement then leads to an essential look at enslaved women limiting the accessible information about them to their skin color and sex while still embedding the gender specific characteristics such as the role of the mother and the woman as object. When Jacob awkwardly tries to choose a slave, he finally settles on the "woman standing in the doorway with two children." She is described as having "one on her hip; one hiding behind her skirts. She looked healthy enough, better fed than the others" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 27). Jacob settles on the woman, yet D'Ortega refuses citing his wife's reliance on the woman. This represents the other interesting gendered point of contention where the stories of sexual encounters float around but are not spoken of. The implied sexual abuse of the slave woman by D'Ortega highlights the limitations surrounding what Wyatt terms as the "unbearable contradiction" imposed on the "position of slave mother" (Wyatt 131). It creates a slave mother paradox yet uses the information to provide better concern and understanding for enslaved women's experiences. Though Florens' perspective of that moment does not capture some of the specific gender concerns, Jacob's perspective gives an opportunity to gather what is happening between the lines.

If the archive represents a hierarchy of information, enslaved women definitely find themselves and their experiences at the bottom. However, as Morrison includes in her novel, a

woman carries with her a story that extends to her children, who if lucky, spend most of their lives with her. The implicit experiences of sexual encounters in this moment float around yet have an incredible impact on not only the women but the generations bore from these moments. In moments like these, relying on our own understandings help with ways to consider these stories. As Annette Gordon Reed writes, “Therefore, we should not be afraid to call upon what we know in general about mothers, fathers, families, male-female relationships, power relationships, the contours of life in small closely knit communities" (Gordon-Reed 32). Even though the archive looks dim, what Morrison can imagine suggests, what our longings push us toward, there is a wealth of details for each woman we have recovered and those we have not.

Jacob’s intriguing perspective, which is that of a slave master, on enslaved and indentured servant females elevates their importance in some ways. He does not represent a typical male perspective on slavery in general and his perspective extends to the enslaved women. He does not differentiate much between women and their status either, but the differences he recognizes does show the challenges with enslaved women’s placement in the archive and their recovery. Morrison writes,

> In the right environment, women were naturally reliable. He believed it now with this ill-shod child that the mother was throwing away, just as he believed it a decade earlier with the curly-haired goose girl, the one they called Sorrow. And the acquisition of both could be seen as rescue. Only Lina had been purchased outright and deliberately, but she was a woman not a child.” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 39–40)

The difference Jacob establishes is age. He recognizes and works to excuse his purchase of Lina, an indigenous servant, because she was not a child. He pats himself on the back in a way for the “rescue” of the children. However, he discounts the experiences of the women. Yes, he

recognizes them as embodying an innate reliability but fails to consider the women's experiences, their journeys that place them in these positions. He sees Florens as "ill-shod" and insinuates her mother as unfit. From his perspective he neglects Florens' mother's story. He does not elaborate with questions of why she would push her girl child to him when he cannot get her.

Morrison works to include the problems surrounding how we understand slavery before the nineteenth century and how perspectives impact them. When it comes to perspectives, Jacob seems to represent the ways those in position to record details or hear stories dismiss them because of the women's status as slaves and servants. Because the limited concern for enslaved women's experiences, the recovery work bumps into challenges that have to be transcended with a variety of approaches. Morrison creates with Jacob a more complex representation of early American white men but presents how the system positions him to need and understand the enslaved women at the basic level of workers than to see the individual experiences. With literature, Morrison includes these elements which represent some real challenges and concerns while encouraging the processes we can use to think of enslaved women's experiences and all those who impact what and how much we know about them.

Morrison writes of the collective points of servitude yet includes the individual stories that are at the heart of the collective typically seen. She writes, "There had always been tangled strings among them. Now they were cut. Each woman embargoed herself; spun her own web of thoughts unavailable to anyone else. It was as though, with or without Florens, they were falling away from one another" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 158). The separation occurring can represent the undeniable lived experience even within a system that thrives on a more collective story of homogenous experiences and capabilities. Even when the collective was primary, it was "tangled strings" representing each woman with her own story. Once cut she could make a web of her

own thoughts "unavailable to anyone else." Morrison complicates why those thoughts are not shared once the women have their own site, but this complication adds to the notion that the lives of these women are more complex than the prevailing numbers in the archive. Some women may have stories that are not accessible to everyone, either by design or due to the lack of details that got melted into their skin. Though with the word choice of "unavailable" it seems Morrison believes these women share to some extent, but it is just not available as part of the "anyone else."

The intermingled perspectives of those a part of Florens and her mother's stories help readers pick up fragments that lead to what seems to be the beginning of the story placed at the end of the novel. At the end Morrison presents the challenges of the enslaved women's stories in the archive. It is the gendered experience of enslavement, motherhood, sexual abuse, and traumatic transatlantic travel that the archive and recorders made little space for. Florens' mother carries origins of stories for herself and a better understanding of her decisions, especially how it impacts Florens. Morrison shows the power of recovering the individual women's stories in order to better understand the more intricate details of the other. Florens can primarily discuss what she knows, and she does not know her mother's detailed experience of being captured, forced to travel, stopped off in strange areas with strangers, and being made responsible for children whose fathers she did not know. When Florens' mother tells Florens to "hear a tua mãe," Morrison challenges us to continue to reach back to see that the archive presents some things as the beginning that are not (Morrison, *A Mercy* 196). That if we push past the frustrations of "facts" we could recover more pieces that make understanding what we do have an empowering experience. Florens offers many more specific details, but her mother's story needs to be known too in order to capture the depth and breadth of even Florens story.

Material Culture

Material culture serves as an important gateway into the lived experiences of enslaved women. They lived in homes, used items, wore garments, and endured punishments with various tools. Morrison incorporates material culture emphasizing the multiple discourses at play when considering enslaved women. It is interesting that a focus of the material culture happens toward the end of the novel showing some sense of evolution of enslaved women's ability to leave something behind. Early on many times we see discussions of literacy, yet as we get to the end, a heavy reliance lands on the material culture, seemingly pairing with a typical scholar's search for more information on female slaves. Morrison uses Scully to consider the lives of the women after Jacob's death and their lives and relationships. She writes, "They once thought they were a kind of family because together they had carved companionship out of isolation" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 183). Scully placed energy on making things, like Sorrow's baby's bed, because one, he wanted to work off his servitude, and two, it seemed to be the way that he would show his care for the women around him. This moment comments on the places we can look for more information on the numbers discussed earlier in this project when look at the ledgers and cargo counts of the ships that do not speak this part of stories. The use of the word "carved" indicates something beyond the oral and written communication that dominates the archive. They make relationships, design stories, and create details that combine to show personal stories of enslaved women that Scully recognizes are in jeopardy.

Soon after Scully's indentured servant perspective, Florens begins her point of view and references material culture as well. Morrison writes, "The hammer strikes air many times before it gets to you where it dies in weakness. You wrestle it from me and toss it away" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 184). Morrison invokes the hammer, signaling the use of it and the possible dismissal

because when the hammer gets to someone else it becomes weak. Considerations of material culture carry certain limitations according to who uses it and includes it. Morrison seems to indicate this, yet shows strength in the agency that can be found in those who use it. Florens does not give up the hammer easily because it has to be wrestled from her, but eventually is taken away. Just as Scully notices the ways in which the women's use of material culture gets jeopardized in some ways. The relationships he thought they were carving seem to be false, and Florens' hammer is thrown away. Despite the comprise of the material items, Morrison still seems to point to them as items that may carry more weight in terms of the personal written narrative.

Morrison's inclusion of the feet and hands, how the feet are covered and what the hands create, provide an interesting way to understand the intersection of material culture and lived experience. The opening of the novel focuses on shoes, and throughout the text Florens' hands and feet connect in various ways to her experiences and how others recognize her. Approaching the end of her journey in the story, her shoes no longer exist. Morrison writes, "I have no shoes. I have no kicking heart no home no tomorrow. I walk the day. I walk the night. The feathers close. For now" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 185). In this moment, she describes the escape Florens makes and challenges she confronts at this time without the shoes. This appears to be a transitioning moment, which represents ways that enslaved women's experiences become lost with the loss of not only their stories but the pieces that make up those stories. Each time we learn of the shoes Florens wears, we learn more about her lived experiences, which is often described as the experiences one has in her shoes. The shoes disappear at this point and "Sir's boots" become a thing of the past that will probably emerge as evidence of his story alone (Morrison, *A Mercy* 184).

Signs of loss and discombobulation linger with the changes embedded in the material culture accompanying the closing of the narrative. The work that the hands do and the items with them do not come together in a linear fashion as Florens reflects on them. Morrison writes, "Chores that are making no sense. We clean the chamber pot but are never to use it. We build tall crosses for the graves in the meadow then remove them, cut them shorter and put them back" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 185–186). The chamber pot may seem to only be a chamber pot until you consider who can actually use it – then it becomes someone's story. The tall crosses become a piece of the story of those who must come back to cut them shorter and place them again. From these two examples, it becomes clearer that stories were being made all around. It is how we access them, and Morrison points out earlier, that determine the work that must be done to gather these stories. Her instructions, so to speak, are to "crawl perhaps in a few places," and she warns of the "discomfort." She follows with the "nail" that "skates away and the forming of the words is disorderly" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 185). Despite the discomfort and disorder, this narrative provides the strategies it takes to learn more of the pieces that can come together to form more diverse stories.

Morrison differentiates how the stories of the enslaved survive in diverse forms. As the novel gets near its closing, Florens begins to talk about the "one day you will learn" and gives instructions of what to do when that day comes: "If so, come to this farm again, part the snakes in the gate you made, enter this big awning house, climb the stairs and come inside this talking room in daylight. If you never read this, no one will. These careful words, closed up and wide open, will talk to themselves" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 188). Here the gate, house, stairs, and "talking room" provide a myriad of ways for one to learn about this enslaved woman. She stakes claim for all of those things not considered to be places for written words and emphasizes the

importance of the spoken word when seeking her story and understanding her experience as a person. Gates establishes, "Black people, the evidence suggests, had to represent themselves as 'speaking subjects' before they could even begin to destroy their status as objects, as commodities, within Western culture" (Gates, *The Signifying Monkey* 129). Florens seems to try and present her speaking self to break from the limitations she finds herself in. She points to the many areas of telling and talking, and no matter where her words may find themselves, she is Florens.

However, the challenge comes when working to become and be remembered as more than the commodity, the privileged written word carries more weight. As Gates states, "What remained consistent was that black people could become speaking subjects only by inscribing their voices in written word" (Gates, *The Signifying Monkey* 130). Morrison seems to show this with the change in where the words are. She writes, “Perhaps these words need the air that is out in the world. Need to fly up then fall, fall like ash over acres of primrose and mallow. Over a turquoise lake, beyond the eternal hemlocks, through clouds cut by rainbow and flavor the soil of the earth” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 188). The words move from the material culture and embed themselves in nature, and Morrison does not have them land on a page. This section builds on the idea of the location of enslaved women’s narratives and the question of what substantiates their telling and talking. Without the written narrative, it seems there is a disconnection between Florens and her mother. Morrison writes, “I will keep one sadness. That all this time I cannot know what my mother is telling me. Nor can she know what I am wanting to tell her” (Morrison, *A Mercy* 189). Since the speaking subject is only recognized with the written word, Morrison seems to show how that notion impacted what others know about the enslaved women and even the disconnection occurring between mother and daughter. These standards and limitations then

create gaps that become difficult to navigate when recovering individual enslaved women's experiences. Florens' journey changes her, and she wants her mother to know that the soles of her feet are "hard as cypress" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 189). How she or anyone else will know will be up to what remains and how they search for it, but the change in her feet indicate the personal experience and material culture seems to be the locale for much information.

Fire enters at the culmination of Florens' story as a challenge to what we can fully know of enslaved women's lives covered in limitations. The writing on the walls and the subsequent burning of the house "seems a commentary on the still elusive history of nonelite early American women's lives and a metaphor for what is not found in the archive" (Logan 196). Although the fire seems to be the end of the story, Morrison insures something remains of Florens' stories. As established earlier, "Perhaps these words need the air that is out in the world" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 188). And the world is not just a structured archive of words on paper but the various locations where material culture has left behind fragments sometimes in nature that surrounds us. It seems lost in the archive as we know it, but it seems to be freed of the limiting representatives of a place and a system that controls the stories. Looking beyond the archive in some plain sights of culture and nature give more agency to the marginalized enslaved women.

Recovering Bodies and Traumatic Experiences

The body becomes one of the important places Morrison tells the women's stories and stretches our expectations of how to learn more about their lived experiences. She places evidence of their trauma and sites for understanding what they feel and helping us consider the more specific longings of what we want to know about the pre-nineteenth century slave women's experiences. The first close, literal look at the body begins with Florens and her contradictory slave hands and feet of a Portuguese lady. It is clearly established that "The beginning begins

with the shoes" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 4). This sentence symbolizes many aspects of the enslaved women's lived experiences. It is the walk in another's shoes that truly provides perspective and empathy. Morrison sets up the journey, the path, which meet up with so many others. The landscape of the Americas builds upon the multiple journeys of a diverse group of people, and with the highlight of Florens' feet and shoes, Morrison indicates the inclusion of enslaved women's experiences are vital.

While demonstrating the lived experience of enslaved women through Florens' feet is critical, Morrison's focus on the collective bodies provide an intense sensory understanding of how the individual bodies can often be overlooked. Early in the novel there is a collective look at the bodies of the slaves being disposed of after they die on board of the ship (Morrison, *A Mercy* 4). The image of the ship with slaves who had died continue an intense thread of trauma through the stories of each character when we begin to learn about Jacob Vaark, Morrison writes, "Disaster had struck. […] D'Ortega's ship had been anchored a nautical mile from shore for a month waiting for a vessel, due any day, to replenish what he had lost. A third of his cargo had died of ship fever. […] He'd had to pile them in two drays (six shillings), cart them out to low land where saltweed and alligators would finish the work" (*A Mercy* 18–19). At this moment, the individual bodies that embody a trauma alone really become powerful as they are thrown together and become this large body covered in trauma as the "saltweed and alligators […] finish the work." This collective body of "cargo" has no definite description, but they are othered. Hortense Spillers describes otherness as one of the categories that the captive body takes on. She writes, "as a category of 'otherness,' the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general 'powerlessness,' resonating through various centers of human and social meaning" (Spillers 457). Within the

"powerlessness" of the grouping of the decomposing collective body of slaves, the center of the trauma of the human body resonates. This image Morrison invokes also seems to speak to the collective landing of pre-nineteenth century slave women. The new shore brings to the forefront the incomprehensible journey of the slaves, and for the women, the representative loss of and small number arriving to the Americas. They are powerless, and their individualism lacks. The shore is a place where they may arrive dead or alive, and in the documentation of any landing or loss, it is merely numbers that rule the narrative.

Morrison does not dismiss the reality of what the trauma of the human body of slaves would mean in the seventeenth century slave world. D'Ortega's punishment is "five thousand pounds of tobacco," which arguably in contemporary times would not be an appropriate punishment for the loss of one life yet the life of a third of an unknown number of "cargo" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 18). Incredibly though, Morrison evokes questions and feelings during this contemporary time that complicate the narrative of pre-nineteenth century slave women through the value of trauma to the body and to the collective experience and memory of all descendants of those whether slave or free. Whether the smell of this amount of decomposing "cargo" haunts those who would have been within distance of what I am sure was a thick blanketing odor in the seventeenth century or a contemporary person reimagining this moment in slavery, Morrison shows a real narrative point that those women being brought over would have dealt with as part of their experience.

Those who are able to experience the trauma that many of the pre-nineteenth century slave women endured, and thus enacted a particular trauma on them as survivors, reveals how the survivors – those who did not die – have their memory as part of their narrative to carry the story of the trauma. Arlen Keizer uses the term "postmemory" that is used by Marianne Hirsch to

"refer to the secondary memories of events absorbed by the children of survivors of trauma" (6). It is within Morrison's look at the trauma, that the suffering of slave women can be shaped and connected to the implication for the contemporary survivors and their desire to understand the narratives of slaves such as pre-nineteenth century slave women. Though at this contemporary moment the secondary memories have been passed down consciously or unconsciously to other generations, Morrison still reveals the trauma the slave women have suffered from that moment to the present moment.

Morrison's act of revealing the traumas of slave women serves a purpose not only to show different experiences that affect everyone, but she also counteracts the repression that occurs during trauma. As Vickroy shows, "There is a collective will to repress how aspects of our social life (violence, poverty, and abuse, for example) allow and even encourage the traumatization of women, people of color, and gays" (14). Though separated by a large number of years, a contemporary view of the transatlantic trauma speaks to the collective trauma that many suffer presently and does not allow the collective body of slave women to continue to repress the traumatic experiences that stem from acts enacted by the decisions we make and the institutions, whether formally or informally, that we create and perpetuate.

Morrison places the trauma not only in the collective body of the slaves but also on the individual bodies of the female characters. When considering traumatic experiences, the body becomes important to the memory and emotions. Gabriele Schwab explains:

> Traumatic memories come in flashbacks or nightmares. They come in memories of the body and its somatic enactments. Traumatic memories entrap us in the prison house of repetition compulsion. To the extent that we are successful in banning thoughts and memories, we become a body in pain, leading a somatic existence severed from

consciously or affectively lived history. (2)

As Morrison creates a collective body of individuals that deal with the physical and emotional pain, she also understands how traumatic experiences, when considering memory, become parts of the body. This is why Morrison's description of Sorrow reveals another aspect of the female body and the trauma it suffers. She writes, "By the time Sir brought Sorrow home, the resident women were a united front in dismay. To Mistress she was useless. To Lina she was bad luck in the flesh. Red hair, black teeth, recurring neck boils and a look in those over-lashed silver-gray eyes that raised Lina's nape hair" (*A Mercy* 63). Initially, Sorrow's body becomes a site for trauma because it most reflects this moment in servitude and the future of the institution of slavery. Here trauma is illustrated with the red hair signaling the color that can be associated with fire or some type of evil desire. The black teeth provide a look at darkness where there is a lack of care of her mouth not necessarily because of her own inability to care but the environment providing little to no opportunity to reach resources. The recurring neck boils show how continuous the trauma is and how within this early beginning of servitude, the inability to cure those boils or give them opportunity to heal foreshadows what is to become of this transatlantic trade.

Bodies and Silence

Morrison's inclusion of silence creates an interesting contrast to the fragmented narratives included in the novel. It seems that acknowledging to some extent the role of silence in a veritable way presents a space for the multiple voices that work to find their stories on their terms. This use of silence previews the archive as it is presented when searching for the enslaved women's experiences. At moments of silence scattered among the pieces of multi-ethnic-servitude experiences, the details of enslaved women's stories merge to fulfill the longing of

those who want to know more about the women not recorded in full and take us closer to the beginning of these women's stories.

It is clear immediately that the body carries many areas of the silenced portions of the enslaved women's lived experiences. One of the earliest instances of silence comes from the moment Jacob Vaark begins to inspect D'Ortega's slaves. When D'Ortega describes the slaves he is "silent about the scars" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 25). This silence impacts Jacob's senses, which become sensitive to all around him – what he smells, sees, and feels. It makes it difficult for him to even pinpoint what could be wrong with him in this moment. He identifies that "[w]hatever it was, he couldn't stay there surrounded by a passel of slaves whose silence made him imagine an avalanche seen from a great distance" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 26). Morrison gives the silence some power that from an archival presence does not always seem to have. The stories demand acknowledgement from others, and the silence can seem dismissive. However, with Jacob recognizing its potential strength to be that of an avalanche, the notion that the silence will be filled indicates silence is much more a space where stories are present rather than the absence of them.

Morrison shows how prevalent the silence is around the captive body as seen in the individual body that is embedded in the collective body of captives. When D'Ortega and Jacob look at the slaves that could possibly settle D'Ortega's debt, she shows the trauma suffered by the individual captive bodies within a collective frame. Morrison writes, "D'Ortega identifying talents, weaknesses and possibilities, but silent about the scars, the wounds like misplaced veins tracing their skin. One even had the facial brand required by local law when a slave assaulted a white man a second time. The women's eyes looked shockproof, gazing beyond place and time as though they were not actually there" (*A Mercy* 25). Interestingly, we see how trauma is

considered with the captive body in many forms and in tandem to the other bodies during the early colonial Americas. The bodies presented in her work show the trauma of the transatlantic trade, and in this contemporary work reveals the re-imaginings of a trauma that has been passed down to generations.

When Morrison reveals information about Sorrow's life before coming to live with Sir, Sorrow does not say anything about her past. Morrison writes, "Not then, not ever, had she spoken of how she got there or where she had been" (*A Mercy* 60). Rebekka has to share what she knows about her addition to the household in order to learn anything about her. Sorrow's silence signals the traumatic experience that she has that she does not speak to those in her new household. The silence stands in place of the unimaginable events that led her to the portion of her life that she now lives in Sir's household.

The enslaved women employ silence within the novel, which seem to show the limitations for words on some different levels. Silence surrounds Sorrow in many ways, and Lina notices it when thinking of how she became a part of their enslaved community. Morrison writes, "Not then, not ever, had she spoken of how she got there or where she had been. The sawyer's wife named her Sorrow for good reason, thought Lina" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 60). The details we know of Sorrow comes primarily from others. Sorrow herself cannot recollect much of her past life "except being dragged ashore by whales," a story invalidated by Mistress, signaling the challenges of silence and what it represents for enslaved women. Lina also recognizes the silence surrounding Florens. She describes her as "[a] frightened, long-necked child who did not speak for weeks but when she did her light, singsong voice was lovely to hear" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 70). Florens, whose narrative pieces threads the novel together, does not succumb to silence and represents more of how silence could be a narrative strategy as the narrative works to create a

"humanized construction of reality" (Amoah 88). Morrison seems to use silence from the women's perspective to establish that silence should not be the primary spot for the non-existent but should be more of the places that we gravitate to, especially when the silence seems to be more of a distancing by the dominant culture rather than a refusal from the margins.

As Morrison continues to show the body, the ever-present silence becomes a significant way that she shows the trauma found within the transatlantic trade. One significant moment is when she describes Lina. She writes, "By then Lina's swollen eye had calmed and the lash cuts on her face, arms and legs had healed and were barely noticeable" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 61). Although a "healing" had occurred, the remnants of the trauma is still "noticeable" and speak in the midst of silence. The Presbyterians did not inquire about her, and "there was no point in telling them" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 61). Though the unnecessary scars fade while the others either choose silence or are traumatized into it, the cuts, though faint, stand to speak to the trauma of slavery. Hortense J. Spillers in the article "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," discusses the captive body:

> First of all, their New-World, diasporic plight marked a theft of the body – a willful and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire. Under these conditions, we lose at least gender difference in the outcome, and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific. But this body, at least from the point of view of the captive community, focuses a private and particular space, at which point of convergence biological, sexual, social, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, and psychological fortunes join. (Spillers 457)

Through the silence of the Presbyterians, Morrison makes Lina's body and trauma "a private and

particular space" in order to provide a place that could reveal the trauma not only on a physical level but the "sexual, social, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, and psychological." The only thing the Presbyterians can come up with in conjunction with the printer is the description "hardy female" that they include in an advertisement (Morrison, *A Mercy* 61). Their inability to say anything more reveals the impact of the viewing of the bodily trauma on an individual. When put face to face with the actual scars, it becomes difficult to name it in that moment. It may be difficult because it is possible that they could not bear to see themselves in those scars. Caruth writes that "the inability to fully witness the event as it occurs, or the ability to witness the event fully only at the cost of witnessing oneself" (7).

Morrison also uses Florens' mother's traumatic experience to reveal aspects of her lived experience as it can be seen on the individual body. Her mother, nameless, knows the trauma all too well and reveals that this trauma is why she would endure the extra trauma of taking a risk by sending her child with a man she is not sure will be better than Senhor. For her mother, "to be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 191). The trauma's initial blow, in this case for a female, is so horrific that it creates a wound that cannot heal. Even if healing in the form of scars occurs, the wound inside is still open and causing pain, signs of existing stories limited within traditional archives and privileged views of the archive.

Morrison is able to reveal in this moment how personal the trauma can be and what details need to be recovered. This description can be a microcosm of how the enslaved women's lived experiences in many ways are "festering […] ever below" in the archives. Not only for those who are ancestors of former "formal" slaves – which can be argued that all humans are in some way – but also for those who now are slaves to any number of things or any number of

people. Florens' mother's significant observation at the end of the novel really shows a distinct individual enslaved woman's experience: "I stayed on my knees. In the dust where my heart will remain each night and every day until you understand what I know and long to tell you: to be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 195). The limiting system of slavery places an enslaved woman's lived experience in a position of perceived silence and fragments throughout the archive. In many cases this misplaces possible longings of enslaved women and the present longing of scholars. What should be clear is the wicked, inhumane nature of slavery, but at the expense of the individual stories of the enslaved women. The choice should not have to be made, but it often is and leaves reaching back farther to pick up on the pieces that when put together create a more representative version of slavery from the enslaved women's perspectives.

When readers begin to learn about Sorrow, Morrison surrounds her with an uncomfortable silence. She writes, "She is ever strange and Lina says she is once more with child. Father still not clear and Sorrow does not say. Will and Scully laugh and deny. Lina believes it is Sir's. Says she has her reason for thinking so. When I ask what reason she says he is a man. Mistress says nothing. Neither do I" (*A Mercy* 9). With the transformation of Sorrow's pregnant body, the silence becomes loud because for Sorrow, the possible sexual trauma she has experienced more than once is traumatic, and her situation does not give her the opportunity to speak. Will and Scully only say enough to deny being the father, and Lina says enough to let Florens know what she believes to be true. Mistress' silence shows how marginal she is as well in this moment, and though Florens is not directly impacted by this traumatic experience, she does not speak either. Speaking may jeopardize her connections and position in this household,

and it also may make the possibility for her to be traumatized in such a real way as Sorrow has been.

Morrison's use of the collective and individual body permits a look at the role of silence, particularly when it comes to understanding enslaved women's lived experience including but not exclusive to traumatic experiences, and how the use of silence alone is found throughout the novel. When discussing the time right before Rebekka arrives, Morrison shows how prevalent silence had been in Lina's experience. She writes, "During all that time Lina must have said fifty words other than 'Yes, Sir.' Solitude, regret and fury would have broken her had she not erased those six years preceding the death of the world" (*A Mercy* 58). Here the repression that is often found in trauma is seen with Lina who seems to have found solace in her silence. Lina's use of silence shows how enslaved women may have had to be selective with their tellings because of the strictures of their enslavement. Though we long to learn more of Florens, Florens' mother, Sorrow, and Lina, how could they share certain experiences? Who would hear it or read it and understand it? It is difficult to not see and not hear in places where we most want to see and hear, but a traditional narrative will not always fit. The silence fills in for Lina and operates as a story as well. The silence continues to play a role in Morrison's description of Lina:

> The company of the other children, industrious mothers in beautiful jewelry, the majestic plan of life: when to vacate, to harvest, to burn, to hunt; ceremonies of death, birth and worship. She sorted and stored what she dared to recall and eliminated the rest, an activity which shaped her inside and out. By the time Mistress came, her self-invention was almost perfected. Soon it was irresistible.

Lina has plenty of details that create multiple stories just from her own experience. The cultural structure of her community, family life, accessories, and lifestyle choices make up the diverse

life she knew. However, Lina made choices to keep certain parts and remove the rest. This method describes ways that the archive may have gaps and silences when it comes to enslaved women's experiences, but the existence of these moments still impacts Lina. It all "shaped her inside and out," and Morrison seems to push for the recovery and recognition of the explicit details as well as the below surface layers covered by the limiting aspects of enslavement. By using Lina's perspective of silence, Morrison accounts for gaps and silences surrounding enslaved women's stories.

Another way Morrison confronts the perceived and real silences surrounding enslaved women's stories is with a focus on Jacob's wife, Rebekka. When Rebekka is suffering with the pox, silence becomes prevalent. She attempts to discuss something with Lina, but she cannot quite finish her thought. She says, "'Blood is sticky. It never goes away however much…' Her voice was intense, confidential as though revealing a secret. Then silence as she fell somewhere between fever and memory" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 85). Right as Rebekka gets to the traumatic part of the memory the trauma emerges as fever and silence takes its role as an indicator of the trauma that cannot be expressed at the present moment. Silence continues to play a major role in Rebekka's life as she fights for her life. During this time "she learned the intricacy of loneliness: the horror of color, the roar of soundlessness and the menace of familiar objects lying still" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 108). The silence is so prevalent during this time that she even recognizes the stillness of familiar objects. Silence becomes so important because of its ability to stand in at moments when as the person goes through the trauma they cannot share with words their feelings. If Rebekka's story cannot be shared in full, it is clear that for enslaved women the limits are stronger. However, details from Rebekka's life highlight the silence but still provides accounts that, though fragmented, recognize moments and details of enslaved women.

Perceptions of the Bodies' Stories

Jacob's assertion that "flesh was not his commodity" when moving among the slaves he had to choose from signals the enslaved humans' bodies as sites of importance. His uncomfortable experience leads readers to the stories of men and women, and he notes the "women's eyes looked shockproof, gazing beyond place and time as though they were not actually there" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 25). However, they are there, and it seems Morrison works to show how the stories dissolve from the perspective of the dominant. D'Ortega speaks of the slaves as only property, and Jacob tries to hang in the balance on his stance of slavery. He cannot deny it as indicated by his reaction to the commerce of flesh and his own physical rejections of the moment. The body on both ends of the experiences reveals some individual details that come in pieces but when brought together as stories provide more information than thought to be there when alone. Bhabha expands the way the body can operate within discourse. He writes,

> It is the art of guiding one's body into discourse, in such a way that the subject's accession to, and erasure in, the signifier as individuated is paradoxically accompanied by its remainder, an afterbirth, a double. Its noise – 'crackle, grate, cut' – makes vocal and visible, across the flow of the sentence's communicative code, the struggle involved in the insertion of agency – wound and bow, death and life – into discourse. (Bhabha 264)

This specific instance where Jacob becomes sure flesh does not seem to be the economic venture of choice shows some of the breakdown and recovery of where stories begin when considering the body. A dismissive approach to the individual women and their stories pinpoints ways their stories do not make it into the archives, and their existence signifies the ways in which some women dealt with the traumatic transitions that occurred during moments of inspection and sell.

While Jacob's perception seems to be pulled in many directions because of his struggle, D'Ortega seems to have mastered a staunch perception of their bodies as properties. Morrison in this moment describes him as "identifying talents, weaknesses and possibilities, but silent about the scars, the wounds like misplaced veins tracing their skin" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 25). For D'Ortega their bodies become property capable of action with the sole purpose of hard labor performance, but he does not discuss it as the tent inhabited by a human soul. His perspective will not answer the questions of emotions, experience, or community. The types of archival information that his perspective represents typically thwart the research that often stems from desires to know the more specific personal details. The dismissal of the bodies as human had been displayed in the early disposal of the bodies of those who died of ship fever. Morrison describes, "Fined five thousand pounds of tobacco by the Lord Proprietarys' magistrate for throwing their bodies too close to the bay; forced to scoop up the corpses – those they could find […] and ordered to burn or bury them" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 19). The location of the bodies become a deterrent for the area, and the lack of care taken with the bodies represent in many ways the concerns with the incomplete archives when working to recover the humans behind the body counts. Those who did not recognize the enslaved humans' bodies as worthy of dignified burials also represent those who do not record the human details of their experiences. Many of their stories follow their burned and carelessly buried bodies when the controlling masters are in charge of the outcomes and how their experiences and stories are preserved.

Other perceptions from a closer position come from Lina. Her observations situate Florens and her body in the context of the time period. Morrison writes, "Florens, she says, it's 1690. Who else these days has the hands of a slave and the feet of a Portuguese lady?" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 4). Based on Lina's expectations for the body in the late seventeenth

century, Florens' body is mismatched. With the slave institution placing emphasis on the physical body as a major marker of enslavement, Florens' body contradicts the expectations for the slave woman's body. By this time Florens' work should have taken a toll on her body and her feet could have been a primary indicator of her status as a slave. However, Morrison does not allow it to be that simple. Florens' represents the multi-layered lived experience of enslaved women, and her feet show that a closer look can reveal their complex narratives.

Conclusion

As Morrison opens her work with the importance of telling, the stories continue providing insight that we long for the archive to have. Much of what Morrison presents about the telling is vital to how we recover and understand women before the nineteenth century, even if it is embedded in ways that make recovering fragments challenging. For Florens who is "lettered" but does not "read what Mistress writes and Lina and Sorrow cannot," she must start with what she knows for sure (Morrison, *A Mercy* 4–5). What this shows readers and inspires scholars to do is consider what the story is for the women as individuals. Her story may have a range of expressions, and that is important for the reimagining of an enslaved women. When discussing Florens' literacy, Babb writes, "Her ability to read in multiple ways and the uniqueness of her expression result in an unco narrative voice that begs for a consideration of how American origins might have been conceptualized had more diverse voices been part of the earliest tellings" (Babb 150).

Florens' ability to write and tell along with her encounters with a diverse group of people tied together by enslavement shed light on the stronghold of the archive and individual experiences. The women in the novel have stories with varied forms of expression. Morrison writes,

> Very quickly I can write from memory the Nicene Creed including all of the commas. Confession we tell not write as I am doing now. I forget almost all of it until now. I like talk. Lina talk, stone talk, even Sorrow talk. Best of all is your talk. At first when I am brought here I don't talk any word. All of what I hear is different from what words mean to a minha mãe and me. Lina's words say nothing I know. Nor Mistress's. Slowly a little talk is in my mouth and not on stone. (Morrison, *A Mercy* 6–7)

Using Florens' experiences with writing and "talk," the scope of narrative expression widens to cover purpose and culture. When it comes to confession, according to Florens, you tell that instead of write it. It is clear that talk is different within indigenous cultures and immigrant cultures, and more understanding within similar cultures as indicated with the admission that Florens and minha mãe do not sound the same as Lina and Mistress. Morrison does not reject or privilege the talk because Florens shares that she likes talk. This implies that the controlling decision makers differentiate what is shared and understood building a chasm lasting even into the twenty-first century. Florens can switch back and forth between the written and oral talk, hear the talk of others, and understand difference. Morrison does not present this as exceptional in her early investigation of telling, talking, and writing.

Later in the novel telling becomes the place for visit, or revisit in a way. Establishing a connection through story seems to be ideal, but it does not happen that way for Florens. Morrison writes, "I am certain the telling will give me the tears I never have. I am wrong. Eyes dry, I stop telling only when the lamp burns down. Then I sleep among my words. The telling goes on without dream and when I wake it takes time to pull away, leave this room and do chores" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 185). Expectations compound the telling, which seems to have a life of its own, creating daily tasks or embedding the seemingly mundane with the details of one's story.

On a more personal level, the telling becomes complex when working to create conversation with stories that intersect. Florens longs to know her mother's story and wants it to be clear. Morrison writes, "I will keep one sadness. That all this time I cannot know what my mother is telling me. Nor can she know what I am wanting to tell her. Mãe, you can have pleasure now because the sole of my feet are hard as cypress" (Morrison, *A Mercy* 189). Florens mother cannot know what Florens wants her to know. It seems that the systemic environment of enslavement has grown in ways that intrude on the ability to preserve and share stories of the women's lived experiences. It does not dampen their desires to know what the other is telling, but it presents challenges that impact them on many levels. The sadness stays because there is a journey that others need to know, but making that happen is difficult.

The enslaved women's experience before the nineteenth century challenge scholars and generations of people of the African diaspora in general who long to know the human details of such inhumane experiences. As Annette Gordon-Reed revisits in *The Hemingses of Monticello* when recalling the early announcements of the transatlantic slave trade database, many people of African descent anticipated learning about the human details yet learned little of that. As she indicates, "The numbers told a story, but in the detached and steely way that numbers tend to do" (Gordon-Reed 22). What those desires to know more do is continue to push us past the numbers and traditional written records to understand storytelling as a viable component of understanding the lived experiences of pre-nineteenth century slave women. Sometimes storytelling is characterized as unreliable within certain standards, but "[s]torytelling is not merely a means of entertainment. It is also an educational tool, and for many, it is a way of life. For others, it is the only way to comprehend, analyze, and deal with life" (Amoah 84). As Morrison exhibited with

the narratives of the enslaved women in *A Mercy*, the telling carried significant importance to those who had it to tell and for those who need to hear and know the story.

Within those tellings are places and cultures that have almost everything to do with the women's existence both then and now. Adding gender to the enslaved dynamics, women slaves need another space because of the particular experiences that come with their female gender. As Spillers describes how "only the female stands in the *flesh*, both mother and mother-dispossessed. This problematizing of gender places her, in my view, *out* of the traditional symbolics of female gender, and it is our task to make a place for this different social subject" (Spillers 80). Enslaved women's differences marginalize them and the work to recover them and continue to have conversations of the significance of their lived experiences and stories move them away from the limitations imposed upon them.

The cultural component adds another level of complexity of recovering and reimagining multiple enslaved women's voices. Bhaba discusses ways in which culture has been used:

> Culture as a strategy of survival is both transnational and translational. It is transnational because contemporary postcolonial discourses are rooted in specific histories of cultural displacement, whether they are the 'middle passage' of slavery and indenture, the 'voyage out' of the civilizing mission, the fraught accommodation of Third World migration to the West after the Second World War, or the traffic of economic and political refugees within and outside the Third World. Culture is translation because such spatial histories of displacement - now accompanied by the territorial ambitions of 'global' media technologies – make the question of how culture signifies, or what is signified by *culture*, a rather complex issue. (Bhabha 247)

The root of displacement for the histories of enslaved women illuminate the scattering that occurred and point to how that should be an indication of why traditional, ordered approaches cannot alleviate the frustration when searching for multiple sites and voices more representative of the millions corralled into slavery. In connection with culture as translation, the complex question of how and what it signifies compel us to discuss culture in ways that add to the recovery of pre-nineteenth century slave women. As Bhaba writes, "My purpose in specifying the enunciative present in the articulation of culture is to provide a process by which objectified others may be turned into subjects of their history and experience" (Bhabha 255). The women become less numbers and more human "subjects of their history and experience," and the frustration and disappointment of an archive of detachment begins to transform into a more open space of recovery and understanding of diverse experiences.

From different perspectives, "[t]he contingent and the minimal become the times and the spaces for the historical representation of the subjects of cultural difference in a postcolonial criticism" (Bhabha 256). One of the spaces as Morrison shows again with *A Mercy* is within literature. In a mid-twentieth century discussion of incomplete slavery records, strategic moves against the distraction of racism, and "one more thing", she says, "And since not history, not anthropology, not social sciences seem capable in a strong and consistent way to grapple with that problem, it may very well be left to the artists to do it. For art focuses on the single grain of rice, the tree-shaped scar, and the names of people, not only the number that arrived" (Morrison, "A Humanist View"). Morrison has done this again with *A Mercy*. From her twenty-first century approach to the enslaved women's experiences, she reaches farther back than she did with *Beloved* signaling the need for more grains of rice, details that shape the outline of bodies and stories rather than economies and capitalism. The novel, "like cultural history, nudges us beyond

the past to the cultural conditions that made that past possible and to a reassessment of past *and* present" (Logan 195). She lays out another blueprint for not only the artists who will follow her but the scholars willing to open their approaches even in the desolate places of the archive to understand the intersections of human bodies, lived experiences, material culture, and stories to recover and reimagine enslaved women from moments in history before the nineteenth century.

Conclusion

While drafting and revising this dissertation project, nine people were killed in Charleston, South Carolina, at the historic Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church.[47] From this senseless, horrific tragedy sprung the continuing conversation and activism surrounding the American system embedded with marginalized experiences that have been steadily resurging on a national and international level for a few years.[48] Many rally around the movement #BlackLivesMatter to combat the rhetoric and actions that pointed back to what we thought was only a thing of the past – the question of if black people are human and therefore considered proprietors of American laws. These more general discussions of race have led to the intersectional conversations showcasing how race and gender impact black women in particular. For instance the case of Sandra Bland, an African American woman who died in custody of

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[47] While beginning this draft, I decided to do a Google search to see if there would be a representative news or commentary piece that I would like to cite or footnote in this area. Interestingly, using the search terms "Charleston nine," the top news section featured various articles of the funeral services that had begun, but immediately after, the highlighted general search returns were about the firefighters who lost their lives in a tragic fire. Seven white men and two black men's faces appear first in the image section. No comparison is adequate in the loss of life and how it is memorialized. What this search did do is remind me of how this work to continually expose the archive from various angles is necessary work. I have had doubts, very concerned if this labor I present will be useful to even just the small community I represent. I will never know the extent of its reach, but if I had not questioned who I am from a generational standpoint, I would not have gotten to this moment. Had I not thought more critically about the lived experience of women whose journeys led me to every letter that I type, someone else may not know where to pick up the work. My Google search showed me a more technologically advanced archival system, run by metrics I know nothing about, and how a look back at the archives and contributions to the archives and how they are preserved and disseminated and considered are what lead us to be better people. This is life or death. What people encounter and have exposure to in terms of history and literature shape their ideologies, epistemologies, and lived experiences in extremely important ways.

[48] I consider Trayvon Martin's untimely death on February 26, 2012 as a marker for when a steady and ever increasing movement to create awareness for racially inspired injustices and demand justice and equality. Much work is always being done, but this marker is for the mainstream resurgence and to situate the Emmanuel Nine in a larger context.

Texas law enforcement after a routine traffic stop, we do not know her side of the story.[49] In a scary way, I watch as my concerns and questions of the pre-nineteenth centuries are relevant to the twenty-first century. What will the archives offer to those who go to it many, many years from now? Whose voices will be preserved and privileged? Will there be multiple narratives or a dominant, controlling one? Will we know that of the Emmanuel Nine, five of them were women, each with their own lived experiences left on the lips of those who knew them? Will we remember and say their names?

Susie Jackson.

Sharonda Coleman-Singleton.

Cynthia Hurd.

Ethel Lance.

Depayne Middleton Doctor.

Myra Thompson.

The women leave behind stories of their lived experiences, not particularly told or written in first person, and therefore, we will have questions of them and long to know of them as we do Phillis Wheatley. Yes, we know the names given to these women by their families and will be able to say them as often as needed. This is progress. However, a bit of the mentality of Thomas Jefferson's "here" persists as various voices work to create a location of comparison. The question still remains if "here" is a location where all can be viewed equally. We will not necessarily find out what the journey of being a black woman in America is like anymore than what we know of Wheatley's enslaved experience in the Americas.

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[49] For more information on Sandra Bland, see "Assessing the Legality of Sandra Bland's Arrest" New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/07/20/us/sandra-bland-arrest-death-videos-maps.html?_r=0 .

Shortly before the devastating loss of the Emmanuel Nine, the remains of an eighteenth century slave ship, São José, were discovered, becoming the first known slave ship that wrecked with African slaves aboard to be studied, identified and excavated ("History of the Sao Jose"). This ship still carries the remains of materials that will be on display at the inaugural opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. What has been recovered on this ship and the story these materials tell will provide tangible and intimate touchstones through which people from around the world will be able to reflect upon and grapple with a trade that spanned the globe, shaped world history and through which millions tragically lost their lives" ("History of the Sao Jose"). The researchers and scholars who did not accept the facts and records as the end of the story bring another element of triumph to a historical moment that must have multiple stories as wide and deep and long as the ocean is and the journeys were.

The New York Times editorial piece describes the São José discovery as a reminder of how human beings and "sophisticated tools of commerce" reigned in the world. Yet they still indicate the lack of stories to match the millions entangled in the horrific system citing this as providing "only the smallest glimpse of the horror endured by the millions who were stolen and sold into bondage" (The Editorial Board). This discovery brings a new element to the eighteenth century material culture, adding more to help us recover the lived experiences of the enslaved. The items of this ship will bring forth more material similar to those we have access to and become important to the narratives of maybe ones we know or do not know yet. Discoveries such as this and recent tragedies such as those nine people at Mother Emanuel remind us to never give up on the pressure we place on the archive. The margins are no place for any experiences, but for too long the experiences of many of the enslaved have lingered there in need of more discussions and questions to unravel the limitations. While our longings to find *the* pre-

nineteenth century slave woman has its issues, we can take those longings and transform them into questions that press us to look in places we have never considered before and look back at places with different lenses.

Forty years ago, Toni Morrison shared her view on how artists and scholars have responsibilities to reveal the stories being covered up by the economic trade records. She says, "The second responsibility of artists and scholars is to bear down hard on those generalities: the statistics and the charts, and make them give up the life they're hiding" (Morrison, "A Humanist View"). She has done this along with others to recovery the humanity that the inhumane actions and systems tried to snuff out. Homi Bhaba and his discourse on culture and our engagement with, in particular, the marginalized reminds us to take in the expansiveness of culture and move beyond the limitations set for it. He writes,

> There is even a growing conviction that the affective experience of social marginality – as it emerges in non-canonical cultural forms – transforms our critical strategies. It forces us to confront the concept of culture outside *objects d'art* or beyond the canonization of the 'idea' of aesthetics, to engage with culture as an uneven, incomplete production of meaning and value, often composed of incommensurable demands and practices, produced in the act of social survival. Culture reaches out to create a symbolic textuality, to give the alienating everyday an aura of selfhood, a promise of pleasure. (Bhabha 246–247)

Once the limitations have been identified, we can put more into practice the confrontations necessary to recover more of the lived experiences at the margins. It will give us what Bhaba sees as "the cultural space for opening up new forms of identification that may confuse the continuity of historical temporalities, confound the ordering of cultural symbols, traumatize

tradition. The African drumbeat syncopating heterogeneous black American postmodernism, the arbitrary but strategic logic of politics – these moments contest the sententious 'conclusion' of the discipline of cultural history" (Bhabha 257). The cultural space for the history of the enslaved yearns for the multiple voices of the pre-nineteenth century slave women to join those who have been recovered and continue to be studied. The range that will be in view and present itself to the world will show a more realistic diversity and subsequently build better conversations to enhance our epistemologies of the African diaspora.

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