

Voices: Silences and Sexuality in 19th- Century Women's Slave Narratives

Senior Thesis

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ABSTRACT

In my paper, I look at the connections between silences and sexuality in 19th-century women's slave narratives, focusing on Mary Prince's *The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself* and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. The silences in these narratives were enforced by notions of chastity at the time, as well as the immediate danger posed against Prince and Jacobs. While sexual labor was very much a part of both British and American slavery, instances of sexual abuse in women's slave narratives were encoded in the language within women's slave narratives. It is these encoded scenes that I analyze in my senior thesis, examining the strategies used by both Prince and Jacobs to convey instances of sexual abuse experienced by themselves and other enslaved people. I aim to build a theory as to how these instances were communicated in each narrative, as well as look at similarities in how both texts approached the issue.

INTRODUCTION

When Harriet Jacobs wrote, “O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave,” in her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, calling to her audience even as she challenged their positions of privilege, to describe the prevalence of sexual abuse within the institution of slavery, Jacobs not only broke convention, pushing the boundaries of the slave narrative genre but also shattered the silences surrounding instances of sexual abuse and slavery. Thirty years earlier, Mary Prince attempted something similar with her narrative, *The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself*, becoming the first enslaved woman to publish a narrative in England. Both women published their narratives about sexual assault during a time when their chastity was valued higher than their veracity. Both Prince and Jacobs found different strategies to convey the issue of sexual abuse, navigating audiences who were unwilling to hear their stories. In this thesis, I examine the language of these attempts, which are occasionally articulated explicitly, but more often conveyed through coded discourse and allusions.

MARY PRINCE’S HISTORY

The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself chronicles the story of an enslaved woman named Mary Prince, along with her challenges and efforts to gain freedom. Prince was born in Bermuda, and the narrative describes her journey to Turks Island and then London, passing through a chain of masters before finally gaining her freedom prior to the publishing of the narrative. Along with being one of the earliest British slave narratives about women, Prince’s story also brought to light the horrors of slavery in the West Indies before the eyes of the public.

There are many interesting points to note about the publishing of Prince's narrative. After gaining her freedom – reluctantly given by her last owner, Mr. John Wood – in London in 1829, Prince began work as a domestic servant in the household of Thomas Pringle, who was an editor and active member of the Anti-Slavery Society. During Prince's stay, she narrated her story to an amanuensis, Susanna Strickland. Given that Prince herself couldn't write, dictating the story was the only way to get it published. After Strickland had written down Prince's story, it was further edited by Pringle before it was published and brought to the public.

Prince's story passed through multiple hands – Strickland's, and then Pringle's – before it became the text that we have access to today. This process inevitably changed Prince's original narration. Editing decisions by Pringle compromised on a complete picture of Prince's voice, and later libel cases over the text revealed that during the initial recording process, Strickland had not written down everything that Prince narrated (Allen 509).

These gaps infringed on Prince's original narration and they form part of what I refer to as silences in the text. Given the very process by which Prince's narrative was published, there are portions of the text that have been altered, removed or contain coded language. Moira Ferguson, in her *Introduction to the Revised Edition to Prince's History*, refers to Prince's language as “strategies for encoding the truth and inviting interpretation beyond the surface message are particularly important regarding the question of sexual experiences” (Prince 4). Prince used coded language to convey information to her readers that might otherwise be edited out if stated more explicitly. While the silences could refer to a range of experiences that the reader does not have access to, I focus on the silences related to sexuality, and specifically, instances of sexual abuse in the text.

The need for silencing instances of sexual abuse in the narrative can be attributed, in large part, to the conventions of gender and chastity of the time. Values of chastity took precedence over the truth, no matter how urgent. The Anti-Slavery Society wanted Prince's narrative to be believed above all else and were ready to compromise on a complete picture of her experiences – which included instances of sexual abuse – to achieve this end. Ferguson elaborates on this:

Mary Prince's *History* was sponsored by the Antislavery Society, who won public support by detailing atrocities and portraying female slaves as pure, Christlike victims and martyrs in one of their major organs of propaganda, *the Anti-Slavery Reporter*. Women whose cause they supported could not be seen involved in any situation (even if the women were forcibly coerced) that smacked of sin and moral corruption. Christian purity, for those abolitionists, overrode regard for the truth. Mary Prince manages to foil this taboo by encoding her abusive sexual experiences (Prince 4).

Despite the restrictions posed on her writing by the Anti-Slavery Society, Mary Prince finds ways to relate the truth to her readers through the text, and it is these moments of sexual abuse that I focus on while studying her narrative. Prince makes references to sexual abuse in the text through three mediums: repetition, descriptions, and implications.

Other than the audience, Prince's silence was also enforced by her editor, Thomas Pringle. Although Strickland and Pringle both wanted to publish Prince's story, their decisions during the publishing process ultimately changed what Prince had written, owing to the subjectivity that they brought in. Given that Strickland and Pringle were both privileged in terms of race, with Pringle having the added advantage of being a white man during the 19th century, whatever omissions or changes they made brings up questions of how authentic the narrative is. While looking at it from a distance today, readers can ascertain that the narrative is composed of multiple voices as a direct result of how it was published, the question of authenticity was a delicate one. As the goal of these narratives was to convince the public of the atrocities brought

about by slavery, questions of how true these narratives were proved a hindrance to their purpose. Bringing coded language about sexual abuse into this discussion of truth exacerbates the situation.

While we cannot determine the exact extent of changes that Pringle's editorial decisions afforded, an examination of the following passage, taken from the Preface to Prince's *History*, tells us that the narrative *was* edited:

The narrative was taken down from Mary's own lips by a lady who happened to be at the time residing in my family as a visitor. It was written out fully, with all the narrator's repetitions and prolixities, and afterwards pruned into its present shape; retaining, as far as was practicable, Mary's exact expressions and peculiar phraseology. No fact of importance has been omitted, and not a single circumstance or sentiment has been added. It is essentially her own, without any material altercation farther than was requisite to exclude redundancies and gross grammatical errors, so as to render it clearly intelligible (Prince 55).

In the above passage, Pringle attempts to reassure the reader that his editing process did not render the narrative any less authentic or truthful than the original document recorded by Strickland, even as he contradicts himself in turn. Pringle says that the narrative was "pruned into its present shape," retaining some amount of what Pringle calls Prince's "particular phraseology." His emphasis that the story is "essentially her own" sheds doubt on the very statement because it draws attention to the fact that Pringle did make changes, thereby rendering the final product as a narrative that was not completely Mary Prince's. Moreover, the claim that his edits made it "clearly intelligible" implies that the original was not clear (Prince 55). Suffice to say, Pringle made a host of decisions at every step of editing: he passed judgments on repetition, grammar and ultimately, Prince's voice. It is therefore entirely plausible – and likely – that parts of Prince's narrative were excluded for the audience.

Referring to the existence of “a tension regarding narrative control,” Jessica Allen writes that Prince’s *History* is “a text inevitably comprised of multiple voices,” (515). Allen further explores salient features of the Creole that Prince uses, one of which is repetition, and how those fared under Pringle’s editing. Repetitions fall into what Pringle deems Prince’s “peculiar phraseology” and most were pruned out as “redundancies” (Prince 55). However, some of these repetitions, where they seemed to be used for emphasis, remained (Allen 516). One of the signs of Prince’s voice lies in the repetitions that Pringle had not edited out. We see these repetitions occur in two instances, both times when Prince depicts how she was verbally abused: first by Captain I- and later by Mr. D-. Prince writes that what Captain I- says is “too, too bad to speak in England,” while Mr. D-’s “words were too wicked – too bad to say” (68, 77). Allen points to the significance of repetition in Creole:

Repetition . . . serves a cohesive purpose in larger narrative structures, and it can signal what the speaker feels is most important on any level of the narrative. . . . Prince's repetition was motivated not only by linguistic and narrative habits but also by the sense that she would not be heard (513).

Given this significance, Prince's repetition of "too, too bad" and "too wicked – too bad" could, therefore, be taken to mean that she was not only conveying something that she feared would not be believed, but also that it was important to her that she was understood. While Pringle removing some of her repetitions can be considered a silence, her remaining repetitions break through those silences to convey instances of verbal abuse.

Prince also conveys instances of sexual abuse through descriptions of situations she is placed in. The first of these occurs when Prince recalls being sold at a slave auction. In the following scene, a slave auctioneer presented her to the attendees:

He took me by the hand, and led me out into the middle of the street, and turning me slowly round, exposed me to the view of those who attended the vendue. I was soon surrounded by strange men, who examined and handled me in the same manner that a butcher would a calf or a lamb he was about to purchase, and who talked about my shape and size in like words – as if I could no more understand their meaning than the dumb beasts. I was then put up for sale . . . and the people who stood by said that I had fetched a great sum for so young a slave. (Prince 62-63)

Prince describes being displayed, turned around slowly, and “surrounded by strange men” who “examined and handled” her while also discussing her “shape and size.” Drawing attention to her position as a human commodity, Prince simultaneously refers to her position as a sexual object. Being thus objectified, she is subjected to handling by strange men, who in turn are compared to butchers, emphasizing her vulnerability in the situation. Prince also hints at the sexualization by speaking about her youth. Since she is young, the high price that is paid is disproportionate to the labor that she can provide, indicating that her body is going to be used for other purposes.

Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman expands on this moment in the text:

Prince notes that she is spun slowly, which insinuates her potential, multidimensional utility. Under the presumed cover of assaying property, men are allowed to engage in acts of lewd tactile handling. Despite the insinuation that her treatment is sexually violating, and that she is improperly and prematurely sexualized by virtue of being brought to public sale, Prince is careful to avoid insinuating that she is for sexual service . . . Prince thus alludes to sexual enslavement as a distinct and a pervasive purpose of slavery (6).

Abdur-Rahman notes that Prince insinuates that “her treatment is sexually violating” while simultaneously avoiding explicit mention of this truth to protect herself from the judgment of her audience. Prince, here, uses a coded description to convey the prevalence of sexual abuse as part and parcel of the institution of slavery without risking raising questions of her chastity.

Following the slave auction, Prince is sold to Captain I- and taken to his house, where she witnesses an instance of sexual abuse inflicted on a slave named Hetty. Hetty was a “French Black” who was “tasked to the utmost” compared to other slaves in the household. Prince had

been friends with Hetty, affectionately calling her “Aunt,” (Prince 65, 67). During the first night that Prince spends under Captain I-’s roof, she witnesses the following scene:

I heard a noise in my mistress’s room; and she presently called out to inquire if some work was finished that she had ordered Hetty to do. ‘No, Ma’am, not yet,’ was Hetty’s answer from below. On hearing this, my master started up from his bed, and just as he was, in his shirt, ran down stairs with a long cow-skin in his hand. I heard immediately after, the cracking of the thong, and the house rang to the shrieks of poor Hetty, who kept crying out, ‘Oh, Massa! Massa! me dead. Massa! have mercy upon me – don’t kill me outright’ (Prince 65).

Notably, Prince explicitly describes that Captain I- left “just as he was, in his shirt.” His state of undress seems coded to imply that Captain I- raped Hetty. The possibility of Captain I- raping Hetty seems more likely given the circumstances surrounding Hetty’s death. “Poor Hetty,” writes Prince, “. . . her death was hastened (at least the slaves all believed and said so,) by the dreadful chastisement she received from my master during her pregnancy.” Prince introduces Hetty’s pregnancy without preamble – there is no mention of who the father is, or if Hetty had any men asking for her hand in marriage. This silence surrounding the identity of the father of Hetty’s child includes the possibility of Hetty having taken a lover – a detail that would not have been permissible within the narrative. The description of Hetty’s violent death is underlined by the fact that it was Captain I- who was responsible for it:

One of the cows had dragged the rope away from the stake to which Hetty had fastened it, and got loose. My master flew into a terrible passion, and ordered the poor creature to be stripped quite naked, notwithstanding her pregnancy, and to be tied up to a tree in the yard. He then flogged her as hard as he could lick, both with the whip and the cow-skin, till she was all over streaming with blood. He rested, and then beat her again and again. Her shrieks were terrible. The consequence was that poor Hetty was brought to bed before her time, and was delivered after severe labour of a dead child . . . Ere long her body and limbs swelled to a great size; and she lay on a mat in the kitchen, till the water burst out of her body and she died (Prince 67).

In the above passage, Captain I- essentially murders Hetty, along with forcefully terminating her pregnancy and causing the loss of her child. Given that Captain I- deliberately causes the death

of Hetty's unborn child, it is likely that Captain I- did rape her, and that he hurt Hetty either in a fit of jealousy, cruelty, or both. The lashings themselves were of a sexual nature, with Captain I-, similar to the ones Prince later endures at the hands of both Captain I- and Mrs. I-.

Prince describes the lashings she received at the hands of both her master and mistress: "To strip me naked – to hang me up by the wrists and lay my flesh open with the cow-skin, was an ordinary punishment for even a slight offense." Indeed, Prince often mentions being stripped, revealing not only the wounds were directly on her skin but also that at least part of the punishment involved turning her into a sexualized object: a naked woman subject to their abuse. The sexual aspect of the whippings is highlighted in another instance where Prince accidentally breaks a vase, and is whipped first by Mrs. I- and then by Captain I-.

When my master came home at night, she told him of my fault; and oh, frightful! how he fell a swearing. After abusing me with every ill name he could think of, (too, too bad to speak in England,) and giving me several heavy blows with his hand, he said 'I shall come home to-morrow morning at twelve, on purpose to give you a round hundred.' He kept his word . . . He tied me upon a ladder, and gave me a hundred lashes with his own hand, and master Benjy stood by to count them for him. When he had licked me for some time he sat down to take breath; then after resting, he beat me again and again, until he was quite wearied, and so hot (for the weather was very sultry), that he sank back in his chair, almost like to faint (Prince 68).

Here, Captain I- verbally abuses Prince with words that were "too, too bad" to mention. In repeating the words, but also not speaking them, Prince paradoxically both censors or silences the sexual violence, but also calls attention to them. Abdur-Rahman similarly argues that although "Prince's narration does not dwell on her nakedness, nor does it explicitly name as such the sexual sadism clearly enacted in the ritual of stripping, binding, suspending, and beating of an enslaved woman," nevertheless, "the sexual depravity of the event, is . . . everywhere implicated in its performance" (8). Although Prince does not explicitly mention this instance as one of sexual abuse, it is implied through her descriptions.

Like other autobiographical narratives of enslavement, Prince describes how she is bought and sold, and she thus recounts that she is sold to Mr. D, who moves her to Turks Island where she harvests salt. But even as her status changes from domestic work to plantation labor, Prince describes how she is still subject to sexual abuse. Referring to Mr. D-'s habitual whippings, Prince writes: "Mr. D- has often stripped me naked, hung me up by the wrists, and beat me with the cow-skin, with his own hand, till my body was raw with gashes" (Prince 72-73). Akin to those she faced at the hands of Captain I-, Mr. D-'s lashings are also sexual in nature, as implied by how Prince was forced naked to endure them.

Prince later describes a scene that calls attention to not only the sexual abuse she had faced on Turk's Island but also the prevalence of sexual abuse in isolated plantations such as the one she worked on in Turk's Island. She recalls that Mr. D- had been physically abusing his daughter when Prince intervened:

He had beat her with his fist, and almost killed her. The people gave me credit for getting her away. He turned round and began to lick me. Then I said, 'Sir, this is not Turk's Island.' I can't repeat his answer, the words were too wicked – too bad to say. He wanted to treat me the same in Bermuda as had done in Turk's Island (Prince 77).

In the above scene, Prince's words – "Sir, this is not Turk's Island," – refers to how violence was inflicted more freely at Turk's Island, where there was less risk of public scrutiny. Bermuda was not as isolated, and hence Prince mentions that Mr. D- could not inflict the same abuse without drawing public attention to some extent. Prince's statement also implies that places like Turk's Island, with their small populations, were centers of rampant sexual abuse. This scene thereby points to how closely sexual abuse was tied to slavery.

In remembering her treatment by Mr. D-, Prince is most explicit about the sexual violence of slaveholders:

He had an ugly fashion of stripping himself quite naked and ordering me then to wash him in a tub of water. This was worse to me than all the licks. Sometimes when he called me to wash him I would not come, my eyes were so full of shame. He would then come to beat me. . . at last I defended myself, for I thought it was high time to do so. I then told him I would not live longer with him, for he was a very indecent man – very spiteful, and too indecent; with no shame for his servants, no shame for his own flesh (77-78).

Prince here explains how Mr. D- often stripped “himself quite naked” and asked Prince to wash him. She felt this was worse than being whipped and disobeyed him when he asked this of her. She deems it an “ugly” and “indecent” act that she recalls with “shame,” thereby expressing how she experienced this act as sexual abuse. Ferguson believes that this scene, despite how it explicitly describes abuse, was not edited out of the narrative because Prince “could publicize overtly her manifest cooperation” (Prince 10). Ferguson seems to argue that as this scene was allowed in the narrative as it depicts Prince completely unwilling to submit to Mr. D-’s wishes, going to so far as to risk being whipped to speak against him. Prince’s unwillingness does not seem adequate to explain the inclusion of this scene as an exception. Prince was unwilling in all instances of sexual abuse, by definition. She likely spoke out against these injustices, so this does not explain why this scene, in particular, was not edited out. What can be said about the scene is that it counts as one instance where Prince uses her voice to talk about sexual abuse. This is a two-fold scene of resistance: firstly, Prince resists and defends herself against Mr. D within the narrative. Secondly, she speaks out against sexual abuse despite the restrictions placed on her narrative.

One crucial aspect of the relative silence that surrounds Prince’s narration of sexual assault is how sharply their depiction contrasts with her descriptions of other kinds of physical abuse. Like many other slave narratives, Prince uses her story to provide vivid descriptions of her treatment: she illustrates with visceral detail the lashings to which she and other enslaved people were subjected. Alongside this, she points to instances of sexual abuse when and where

she can. While in some instances of the text her voice is louder than in others, Prince makes an effort to address the issue of sexual abuse in slavery.

HARRIET JACOB'S *INCIDENTS*

Originally written under the pseudonym Linda Brent, Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is sister to Prince's narrative. Harriet Jacobs was a slave born in North Carolina in 1813. Having grown up sheltered for the early years of her life, she wasn't aware of being enslaved until she was six. Following the death of her mistress, Jacobs was sold to Dr. Norcom, who she refers to as Dr. Flint in the narrative. Dr. Flint sexually harassed Jacobs for years, and there has been some debate as to whether he succeeded in raping Jacobs, which I talk about later in the paper. Jacobs manages to run away and evade Dr. Flint for seven years until she escapes to New York.

While both women find ways to address the issue of sexual abuse within slavery, Jacobs makes a case to draw attention to that which Prince's narrative could only subtly express. Jacobs breaks the silences surrounding sexual abuse among the enslaved by providing much more explicit and detailed descriptions of her victimization, thereby also shedding light on the way that sexual power operates within the system of slavery. But, like Prince, Jacobs also uses silences as a tool to navigate the topic of sexual abuse among her white middle-class female audiences without offending their sensibilities. Her silences in the latter instance work as a mechanism to give expression to sexual abuse while maintaining her audience.

As with Prince, it is difficult to know where to locate the silences around sexual assault since they are, by definition, almost inaudible. But we can hear the first instance of silence in the

first chapter of *Incidents*, which is marked by absence, by a loss of continuity when Harriet Jacobs describes her grandmother's descent into slavery:

It was during the Revolutionary War; and they were captured on their passage, carried back, and sold to different purchasers. Such was the story my grandmother used to tell me; but I do not remember all the particulars. She was a little girl when she was captured and sold to the keeper of a large hotel. I have often heard her tell how *hard she fared during childhood*. But as she grew older she evinced so much intelligence, and was so faithful, that her master and mistress could not help seeing it was for their interest to take care of such a valuable piece of property (9, emphasis mine).

Here Jacobs offers a brief account of her grandmother's early life and her entrance into slavery, before shifting to her grandmother's later life. Given Jacobs's willingness to detail how her grandmother's hard work was exploited, this reluctance to discuss with any detail "how hard she fared during childhood" marks an absence—a moment wherein Jacobs does not seize the opportunity to elaborate on these particular evils of slavery. Notably, Jacobs also never mentions her maternal grandfather. Both these instances in the above passage imply that Jacobs' grandmother was sexually abused.

Jacobs also indicates sexual abuse through the language of hearing. Jacobs writes, "I have often *heard* her tell how hard she fared during childhood" (9). There are two things to note about this phrasing. First, Jacobs's regularly uses an auditory metaphor to express sexual abuse, as Deborah Garfield explains:

Jacobs actually invests in a cunning manipulation of the very sign-systems of nineteenth-century American abolitionism – especially the paradigm of an apparently 'promiscuous' speech and the ear it enters – in order to open her text to whispered revelation. In *Incidents* speech and hearing represent sexually resonant events through which Jacobs intimates to her reticent audience – preferring its bitter truths spooned in euphemisms – violations that cannot be explicitly uttered (109).

Since the narrative establishes hearing or listening as the mechanism for sexual abuse, it is possible that Jacobs's grandmother passed down her story of sexual assault to Jacobs, who

“heard” it in the same way that her white audience is “hearing” her own story. Second, the fact that Jacobs uses the present perfect tense in the sentence, even though her grandmother had passed away at the time this was written, implies that the “hearing” is resonant: although her grandmother has died, her story is still being passed on. And, of course, her grandmother’s story resonates with Jacobs’s own, because they share similar experiences.

Jacobs communicates the sexual abuses within slavery in the first chapter of *Incidents* by describing how many children are conceived from rape. The possibility that Jacobs’s grandmother was a victim of sexual abuse is indicated, for example, when Jacobs mentions her uncle Benjamin: “There was so little difference in our ages that he seemed more my brother than my uncle. He was a bright, handsome lad, *nearly white*; for he inherited the complexion my grandmother had derived from Anglo-Saxon ancestors” (10, emphasis mine). On the surface, this attention to skin color does not seem unusual, given that Jacobs employs a similar tactic while introducing her parents: “In complexion my parents were a light shade of brownish yellow, and were termed mulattoes” (9). However, this introduction of Benjamin is markedly different, as she calls attention to it by talking about it as trait passed down from her grandmother. Jacobs here describes skin coloring to draw attention to generational sexual abuse. Her uncle Benjamin’s deriving features from “Anglo-Saxon ancestors” implies that he had a white father. Similarly, the question of white parenthood – and consequently, rape – is pointed to in Jacobs’ description of her parents’ light complexion. Jacobs herself could be a child conceived of rape, unless her parents came from mixed heritage.

Jacobs similarly describes another instance of sexual abuse in chapter two. Narrating the story of a man who had been whipped by Dr. Flint, Jacobs writes, “There were many conjectures as to the cause of this terrible punishment . . . [some] said the slave had quarreled with his wife,

in presence of the overseer, and had accused his master of being the father of her child. They were both black, and the child was very fair” (15). Once again, Jacobs refers to the complexion of the child to convey the sexual assault of the enslaved woman. Later in the same scene, the couple are sold by Dr. Flint and this proves significant because it demonstrates how silences about sexual abuse are preserved by slaveholders:

When the mother was delivered into the trader's hands, she said, ‘You *promised* to treat me well.’ To which he replied, ‘You have let your tongue run too far; damn you!’ She had forgotten that it was a crime for a slave to tell who was the father of her child. (Jacobs 15 – 16).

In rehearsing this dialogue, Jacobs allows us to see the ways that the victims of sexual assault were required to be silent and that this woman is punished quite explicitly for speaking it aloud. The agreement between Dr. Flint and the slave mother was binding in a way to protect Dr. Flint. If the slave mother remained silent, she would have to endure Dr. Flint's advances. If she spoke up, she would risk being sold. Sandra Gunning, explains how Jacobs's narrative attempts to overthrow this structure of power:

Brent’s narrative works to undermine the careful protection Flint has constructed for himself . . . Her vocalization finally allows the lost story of the slave couple to surface, despite Flint’s prohibition (140).

Jacobs’s narrative breaks the silence of Dr. Flint’s crime to bring out the truth of his sexually abusing the enslaved woman and then selling her.

Jacobs’s primary focus is on the sexual abuse of a woman in slavery, but she also describes the sexual abuse of enslaved men. For example, she reveals the story of Luke, who was given to a “young master” who was ill and bedridden:

As [the “master”] lay there on his bed, a mere wreck of manhood, he took into his head the strangest freaks of despotism; and if Luke hesitated to submit to his orders, the constable was immediately sent for. Some of these freaks were of a nature too filthy to be

repeated. When I fled the house of bondage, I left poor Luke still chained to the bed of this cruel and disgusting wretch (149).

While instances of sexual abuse with female slaves have previously been indicated in the text through the language of offspring or absences, Jacobs uses description and implications to describe the abuse Luke faced. Jacobs hints at the abuse, such as how the constable was immediately sent for if Luke "hesitated to submit". Jacobs refers to Luke's rape as "strangest freaks of despotism" which were "too filthy to be repeated" (Jacobs 149). Jacob further conveys the abuse that took place with the following scene:

He kept a cowhide beside him, and, for the most trivial occurrence, he would order his attendant to bare his back, and kneel beside the couch, while he whipped him till his strength was exhausted. Some days he was not allowed to wear anything but his shirt, in order to be in readiness to be flogged (149).

This scene echoes Prince's narrative, and how she was made to strip down before incurring lashes at the hands of Captain I- and later, Mr. D. Here, similarly, Luke is made to "bare his back" and "was not allowed to wear anything but his shirt" (Jacobs 149). Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman expands on this scene in Jacobs' narrative:

. . . the cowhide functions as a phallic replacement, as in instrument for inflicting punishment and sexual torture. The sex act underlying the beatings is revealed in Luke's having to undress and kneel to receive his punishment, as well as his having to spend days unclothed beneath the waist. Although his back is the purported site of his whippings, Luke is allowed to wear a shirt but is made to go around with his lower parts exposed to receive his master's *additional* punishment (232).

Jacobs here reveals the sexual depravities of slavery, noting that women were not the only victims of sexual abuse, and exposes yet another evil of the institution.

While Jacobs breaks silences surrounding sexual abuse, she must also use silence to navigate a readership that has strict notions of female chastity. Using silence to speak to her readers, Foreman writes, causes Jacobs to participate in what Foreman calls the "undertell":

Nineteenth century 'truth', for the slave narrator's audience, was most threatened by exaggeration of the social evils of slavery, by, in other words, rhetorical excess. 'Delicacy' and 'modesty,' virtues valorized in women's, and even African-American male's narratives, allowed for and even demanded that narrators come systematically short of the 'truth,' and that they maneuver in the field of what I call the undertell (77).

To present herself as a credible narrator, Jacobs had to make allowances for her audience. There were restrictions on what she could and could not reveal about her life for her narrative to fulfill its purpose about making a case against slavery.

This is best seen in the passage where Jacobs says that she had an affair with Mr. Sands as an act to self-preservation, to ward off Dr. Flint's sexual advances, which had been growing increasingly threatening. Jacobs attempts to convey what happened without alienating her delicate readers.

But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely! If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice . . . but all my prospects had been blighted by slavery. I wanted to keep myself pure; and under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect (46);

Jacobs addresses her reader's discomfort with the subject of extra-marital sex but also asserts that slavery made such values impossible for her to attain. Moreover, she underscores that slavery pushed her into her affair with Mr. Sands:

It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and affection . . . There may be sophistry in all this; but the condition of a slave confuses all principles of morality, and, in fact, renders the practice of them impossible (47).

Foreman describes how these passages serve as coded language to those in the audience willing to hear Jacobs's truth: that Dr. Flint did rape her, and in an attempt to free her children, she had

an affair with Mr. Sands to confuse paternity and gain her children's freedom. Jacobs writes about how enslaved women are constantly battling sexual abuse or the threat of sexual abuse:

The slave girl is reared in an atmosphere of licentiousness and fear. The lash and foul talk of her master and his sons are her teachers. When she is fourteen or fifteen, her owner, or his sons, or the overseer, or perhaps all of them, begin to bribe her with presents. If these fail to accomplish their purpose, she is whipped or starved into submission to their will. She may have had religious principles . . . *But resistance is hopeless* (44, emphasis mine).

Jacobs is doing two things here. On the one hand, she does not provide any concrete details about the “licentiousness and fear” to ensure that her audience listens to her story. On the other, Jacobs makes explicit the prevalence of sexual abuse. These two strategies culminate in the following passage:

Pity me, pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another. You never exhausted your ingenuity in avoiding the snares, and eluding the power of a hateful tyrant . . . I know I did wrong. No one can feel it more sensibly than I do. The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day. Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others (47-48).

Here Jacobs addressed her readers once again. Her tone, as she calls her reader “virtuous” is scathing. Jacobs plays on her audiences’ idealization of chastity to make her point about how enslaved women should not be held to the same standards of virtue as their white, privileged counterparts. She repeatedly draws attention to the fact that slavery left no room for the safety of a woman, let alone her virtues.

Her audience, however, is not completely accommodated in the text. There are moments when her audience's unwillingness to hear her story is implicated within the narrative itself. When Brent tells Mrs. Flint about Flint's sexual advances, Mrs. Flint herself become a sexual predator:

She now took me to sleep in a room adjoining her own. There I was an object of her special care, though not of her special comfort . . . Sometimes I woke up, and found her bending over me. At other times she whispered in my ear, as though it was her husband who was speaking to me, and listened to hear what I would answer. If she startled me, on such occasions, she would glide stealthily away; and the next morning she would tell me I had been talking in my sleep and ask who I was talking to. At last, I began to fear for my life (31).

Jacobs describes how Mrs. Flint would bend over her while she slept, whispering in Jacobs' ear "as though it was her husband," and listened to hear Jacobs' reply. Mrs. Flint surprised and scared Jacobs, and glided "stealthily away" to avoid being caught. This portrait of Mrs. Flint is similar to Prince's description of Mrs. I-. While Mrs. Flint sexually harassed Jacobs in her sleep and Mrs. I- violently whipped Prince, both women – wives of slaveholders, the narrative points out – are portrayed as sexual abusers, similar to Dr. Flint and Captain I-. According to Deborah Garfield, the above scene in the text is when the readers and Mrs. Flint are implicated as one in their unwillingness to accept Brent's story:

Mrs. Flint's obsessive perusal of Linda's body . . . designates the point at which the reader and the vigilant, judgmental mistress most dangerously converge. The reader, too, surveys Jacobs's black body and seeks to establish its relationship to her narrative credibility, that is, to the text itself, its jeremiads, and its interpolated conversations (115).

Jacobs' audience values her chastity as a prerequisite to the credibility of her narrative. This forces Jacobs to participate in the undertell and to carefully mention instances of sexual abuse. Even when most vocal and speaking about the constant sexual threat to enslaved women, Jacobs is careful about maintaining this image of virtue. Mrs. Flint and Jacobs's audience are being compared here because in both cases, the doubt on Jacobs chastity casts doubt on her truth. Just as Jacobs's audience seeks to establish her virtue before believing her narrative, so Mrs. Flint seeks to determine the same. At this point in the narrative, both the audience and Mrs. Flint refuse to help Jacobs by offering skepticism in return for her truth.

CONCLUSION

While the *History of Mary Prince* is not directly concerned with sexual abuse faced by women slaves in the same way that *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is, the two nonetheless employ silence to communicate instances of sexual abuse within the narrative. Both Prince and Jacobs faced verbal harassment at the hands of their masters, and refer to these incidents in the same way – alluding to words that were too horrible to be repeated. Both women make a point to show how sexual violence was systemic to the institution of chattel slavery, detailing the experiences of other enslaved persons who suffered sexual abuse. And both Prince and Jacobs also describe sexually threatening white women. Prince recalls how Mrs. I-'s whippings were of the same nature as her husbands. And Jacobs explains how Mrs. Flint became a de factor sexual predator in her quest to discover whether her husband had raped Jacobs. The impact of slavery on women and children within slave-holding households was part of each woman's argument. Prince added to this through her description of Mr. D- physically abusing his daughter, Miss D, showing how violence spilled from the plantations into the domestic sphere.

Although Prince and Jacobs wrote at different times, in different countries, both women made strong arguments not only against the abominable institution of slavery but also very specifically against sexual abuse within slavery. Despite the restrictions placed on their writing, and consequently, the very recounting of their stories, Prince and Jacobs each employed language and allusion masterfully to advocate for a stance to which their audience was not prepared to listen to. While their accounts took place centuries in the past, their struggle to express instances of sexual abuse and demand that such instances cease, echo in our society today, where the conversation surrounding sexual abuse has a long way to go to creating a safer

place for everyone. Mary Prince and Harriet Jacob's voices remain brilliant, illuminating the past, and bringing new insights for the future.

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