In slavery, women were frequently raped to breed more slaves or simply as a way for their masters to demonstrate that slaves were their property. This is a deeply painful element of life as a slave that many women were unable to avoid. In her article “Seduction or Rape: Deconstructing the Black Female Body in Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,*” Patricia Hopkins describes the way that the struggles of black women are often “overshadowed” by the issues faced by white women or black men (5). This intersectional ignorance combined with the stigma around sexual assault and abuse leads to silencing black women who are trying to reclaim their identity. Hopkins also points out the contrast between the way that black men are often falsely depicted as rapists as result of slavery but black women are six times more likely to be raped than white women. Hopkins says that the real issue lies in the fact that this statistic is not used to “move forward the discussion concerning the violated black female body” (5). One element of slave narratives and neo-slave narratives that does move this discussion forward is women who gain sexual agency and a sense of self outside of slavery through consensual sex. This can be seen in James McBride’s depiction of Pie in his novel *The Good Lord Bird,* and Harriet Jacobs’s depiction of herself in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.*

In her autobiographical work, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* Harriet Jacobs, under the pen name Linda Brent, recounted her struggle to avoid being raped by her master, Dr. Flint. She also depicted many other struggles of being a slave. In her article, “African-American Feminist Discourses: Understanding the Writings of Harriet Jacobs and Adrienne Kennedy,” Saranda Thallam states:
The gendered facet of slavery is effectively recounted in a language of her own. Jacob’s language depicts the peculiar woes of a slave woman like forced sexual coercion, rape, paranoid fugitiveness, fear of discovery, paralyzed life in the attic, flight towards freedom, maternity, protection of children etc. Jacob’s discourse is both aimed at exciting sympathy, and at consciousness raising, especially amongst the women of the North regarding the dehumanizing dimensions of slavery and its impact on the southern slave women (24).

It is clear that Linda’s story is a powerful, feminist text that examines the idea of what it means to be a black woman, a mother, and sexual being while enslaved. Her story of spending most of her life running from being raped exposes the systematic oppression of black women that began in slavery and continues to have implications into the present.

Linda is favored by her master because he considers her to be very beautiful. He begins to pursue her at a young age, and this forces her abruptly into womanhood. Brent notes that a beautiful, young slave girl “will become prematurely knowing in evil things. Soon she will learn to tremble when she hears her master’s footfall. She will be compelled to realize she is no longer a child. If God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse” (Brent 437). Brent makes it clear that it is not truly a blessing to be favored by your master. Of course no slave has the bodily autonomy that freedom ensures, but these women are disenfranchised from their bodies through work and through sexual abuse. The abuse that looms over Brent and women like her is a threat both physically and emotionally. Brent states, “a favorite slave… is not allowed to have any pride of character. It is deemed a crime in her to wish to be virtuous” (439). Being raped will destroy Brent’s view of herself as a virtuous woman, even though rape is never the
result of anything the victim has done. She begins to live in a world dominated by rape and the
fear of rape, which none of the slaves discuss because of their own fear of Dr. Flint.

Jacobs is noticeably disheartened by facing the reality of her impending rape, and the
other slaves see this, but they do nothing to intervene. Jacobs says, “Many of them pitied me; but
none dared to ask the cause. They had no need to inquire. They knew too well the guilty
practices under that roof” (Brent 437). Dr. Flint is known for raping, impregnating, and then
selling slaves. His wife hates the way that her children must be around his slave children, so he
appeases her by selling the children and their mother (Brent 465). All of Dr. Flint’s slaves are
well aware that Jacobs is his next target, and they are unable to do anything to save her from
entering this cycle of abuse and abandonment.

With this in mind, Jacobs spends all of her time scheming about ways to avoid Dr. Flint,
and he is always scheming about ways to corner her. Linda, wanting to preserve what she can,
decides to take control of the situation by initiating a relationship with Mr. Sands, a neighbor of
the Flints and a white slave-owner. Of this, Brent says, “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 attachment” (465). This makes
it clear that while Linda is not thrilled with either prospect, she does feel a sense of freedom in
her sexual agency and her ability to make this one decision for herself. After becoming pregnant
with Mr. Sands’s child, and taking away Flint’s prize of her virginity, Linda must confess her
sins to Flint and her family. She feels “triumph” over Flint, but shame toward her family (Brent
466). Her grandmother’s disappointment weighs heavily on Linda throughout her life.

In defense of herself and her decision to pursue Mr. Sands sexually, Brent says:
If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by the laws… 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; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong for me. (Brent 464)

Brent makes it clear that she never wanted to make this choice. Her virtue, as previously noted, is a value that her grandmother instilled in her and in which Linda herself took great pride. Slavery, by taking away Linda’s right to her own body and sexuality, forced her to act out as her only means of preserving some of sense of self, even though this behavior would not usually have been seen in such a way.

Linda’s relationship with Sands is also not truly consensual. While Linda willingly enters the relationship, and it does not have the violence that being raped by Flint would bring, this relationship is coercive. Sands tells Linda that he will do many things for her, including freeing her brother, and he goes back on his word. This keeps the power dynamic between the two of them very clearly defined (Hopkins 6). While Linda has made a choice regarding her sexuality, it has come with the price of further manipulation.

Hopkins notes that where Linda asks for her virtue to be redefined, she is also, in another way, asking for “a redefinition of ‘victim’ too” (10). The idea that Linda could be enticing to Sands and Flint and fully consent to sex with Sands feeds into the idea that black women are purely sexual in their existence, a stereotype that is still prevalent in American culture. This is why it is incredibly important for black women to have sexual agency and control their sexual identity.
In the article “Splitting The ‘I’: (Re)Reading The Traumatic Narrative of Black Womanhood In The Autobiographies Of Harriet Jacobs And Elizabeth Keckley,” Clarence Tweedy states, “representations of sadomasochistic violence function as reproductions that, on the one hand, challenge the social definitions and limitations of black identity while, on the other hand, create a means through which authors lay claim to their subjectivity” (21). Here, Tweedy acknowledges that Brent’s narrative about her relationship with Mr. Sands and her evasion of Dr. Flint is a way for her to claim her story and create an identity.

While Linda was able to begin to see herself as free during her relationship with Sands, she was able to gain full agency of herself by writing the story of her life. This narrative “enacts the rhetorical role of claiming their selves with their symbolic language” (Thallam 24). Writing her own narrative and allowing it to be published shed light on the issue of rape in slavery, and this is something that gives a voice to Linda as well as other victims who were silenced by circumstance.

Control is something that Pie is always grappling with in James McBride’s 2014 novel, The Good Lord Bird. Pie is a slave who is in charge of renting out her master’s other slaves. She is also a prostitute. When Onion sees Pie for the first time he is aware she is a “whore,” but he distinguishes her from other prostitutes by noting that she was “all class” (McBride 144). As a prostitute, Pie is able to control her income. Onion states that, “Pie was the busiest whore on the Hot Floor. She had heaps of customers: Pro Slavers, Free Staters, farmers, gamblers, thieves, preachers, even Mexicans and Indians lined up outside her door. Me being her consort, I was privileged to line ‘em up in order of importance” (McBride 170). She has so many men who want to be her customers that she can pick and choose whom she allows to have sex with her. She is aware of what she can get out of these men, mostly information or money, and is able to
make decisions with this in mind. She is also able to have some financial independence. Pie, unlike other slaves, is able to set her own hours for work and choose the work she wants to do. This gives her authority over her body, her time, and her finances, all of which are incredibly important to building an identity as more than a slave, though she is not free.

The way that Onion is fixated on Pie, and her sex life, does show ties to the image of black women as sexual objects, but *The Good Lord Bird* goes on to dismantle this image. Pie is a complex woman who has two very different sexual selves, as well as being a calculating businesswoman. She is also a maternal figure to Onion. He calls her “the mother I never knewed, the sister I never had, and my first love” (McBride 150). In that same passage, she spanks Onion for costing her money (McBride 152). This shows that while Onion has a romanticized view of who Pie is, she is the first person to give Onion some form of rules, expectations, and stability. Onion tries to force her into the mold of being an object, but she is always defying his expectations as well as the cultural expectations that are held for black women, especially slaves.

Pie’s relationship with Darg is part of what sets her outside of this image. Onion hears Pie “squawking” and believes that she is in trouble, so he rushes to find her. He is deeply troubled when he finds Darg and Pie having sex. Pie is being whipped by Darg. Onion says, “Her head was threwed back and she was howling while her rode her and called her a high-yellow whore and a turncoat” for betraying the insurrection. It is clear that Pie’s relationship with Darg is ingrained with racial tension, and this would be of concern, but Pie enjoyed it. Onion describes her as looking “of liking the whole business immensely” (McBride 190). Pie may reconcile her identity as a light-skinned woman with her role as a slave and a whore through how she interacts with Darg, but that is a consensual choice she makes when engaging in sex with Darg.
Something that distances Pie from the exotic and erotic image of black women is her lightness. Pie is a “mulatto woman,” and her skin is so much lighter than the other slaves that she considers herself to be in a separate class (McBride 144, 146). While this is a feature that draws customers to her, it is something that she uses to create an identity for herself that is not defined by sex. She sees herself as having power over the other slaves, and this is a power that Miss Abby trusts her with, but one Pie is always fighting for. Pie is always trying to keep Miss Abby happy and prove that she is qualified. When Onion ruins a scarf Pie assures Miss Abby that she will fix it, and Onion hears “terror” in her voice (McBride 150). This shows that while Pie is sometimes elevated within her role as a slave, she is never truly free from slavery. The only time she is not delicately balancing her behavior to fit into her role is when she is with Darg and behaves in a way that is not monitored by the other slaves or by Miss Abby. Tweedy states that, “scenes of violence are used to re-assert psychological control over traumatic memories, experiences, bodies, and self-identity” (21). This is what Pie does by acting as a submissive slave in the safety of her intimacy with Darg. This experience allows Pie to reconcile all the sides of herself which she must keep separate when she is alone not with Darg.

Under the burden of slavery and rape, black women were dehumanized due to both their race and their sex. During slavery, the rape of black women by their masters was a common but silent aspect of life that they were expected to accept. This is something that Linda Brent and Pie both did not accept. Both of these narratives defy “the condition of African American women groveling under the horrendous system of slavery” that is commonly represented (Thallam 23). They defied the expectation to submit by defining their sexual identity for themselves. Their sexual agency in response to being enslaved gave each of them an identity which removes them
from slavery for a short time. It creates an aspect of their life which they can control, and that gives both Pie and Linda some freedom and a sense of self.
Works Cited

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